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**When being professional means becoming myself  
towards integrity and presence in practice**

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# **When being professional means becoming myself: towards integrity and presence in practice**

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
University of Bath  
School of Management  
Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice (CARPP)

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*The true professional is one  
who does not obscure grace  
with illusions of technical prowess,  
the true professional is one  
who strips away all illusions to reveal*

*a reliable truth  
a reliable truth in which  
the human heart can rest.*

Margaret Wheatley  
*The True Professional*  
(2009)

## Table of Contents

Front Piece: The True Professional	ii
Table of Contents	iii
Abstract	vi
Acknowledgements	vii
1. Introduction	1
Ways of Seeing	6
Labelling and Naming	9
Metaphors of the Journey	12
Thinking and Acting Professionally	15
Validity/Quality	17
Ethical Considerations	23
The Thesis	27
Interlude: The Voyage with Brendan	32
2. Facing into the Wind	44
The Fodder of Experience	45
Inquiry in Action	51
Relational Inquiry	56
Systemic Inquiry	60
Writing as Inquiry	64
Narrative Inquiry	70
A Religious Quest	75

3. First You Have to Row a Little Boat	84
Recognising Different Sources of Knowledge	86
Aspirations of Phronetic Practice	89
Living My Inquiry	92
Developing the Inquiry	97
A Different Way of Knowing	102
A Blind Spot	105
Making Sense in Embarrassment	108
Arriving in the Moment	114
The Reflective Process	120
Beyond Reflective Practice	125
4. The Shortest Distance Between Two Points is a Zigzag Line	129
To Mentor or Not to Mentor	133
Towards Haptic Vision	140
Putting Heart and Soul into Research	142
Collaborative Inquiry	145
Taking a Relational Attitude to Inquiry	154
A Relational Ontology	159
Wrestling with Control	163
Glimpsing the Perichoresis	169
Value or Virtue?	172
5. I Listen to the Wind and the Wind Tells Me What to Do	175
When a Teacher Becomes a Learner	179
Finding a Language for Learning	183
Into the Mainstream	187
Navigating Systems	193
Management by Grenade	198
Intermission: The Wisdom of an Ass	201
Thinking and Acting in Systems	202
August 12th 2008	209

6. I Hear the White Bird Speak for the First Time	220
Crossing the Threshold	225
Finding My Voice	230
Chasing After Wind	237
Confronting Hubris	245
Becoming Myself	252
References	266

## **Abstract**

This thesis seeks to elaborate the inner qualities of integrity and presence in professional practice. It is offered as a contribution to the growing body of literature that shifts the emphasis in professional development from the transfer of skills and knowledge to the transformation of practice. Professional education has been viewed as the acquisition of the knowledge and skills required to address the presenting problems of daily practice. It has been assumed that the answers to these problems can be identified, codified and passed on to others, resulting in a kind of professionalism by protocol. But, as Dreyfus & Dreyfus (2005) have pointed out, there is a qualitative shift in the practice of experts when compared to novices and beginners. The expert evidences a deliberative skill that does not rely on the application of protocols but on extensive case by case experience. Indeed professionalism may be understood as the quality of practice that is evident at the very moment when protocols no longer apply (Coles 2002).

Professional practice is not a simple concept as Kemmis (2006) has shown. The thesis contributes to this field by suggesting that professionalism is acquired through prolonged inquiry into the contingencies of quotidian practice and that this shapes the inner qualities the practitioner brings to their practice. It is offered as a first person inquiry (Reason 2001) that probes fractals of my own professional practice over a five year period. In telling my personal story, I give an account of an emergent methodology that engages with action research and narrative inquiry. A narrative mode of knowing (Bruner 1986) notices the complex, many sided and sometimes conflicting stories of professional life resulting, not in a set of propositional claims, but in an account that provides the reader with the imaginal space to enter the process and participate, with me, in making sense of professional practice.

## Acknowledgements

To professional colleagues with whom I have worked in many different contexts around the world and whose fingerprints are all over this thesis. Thank you. To my students, going back to the earliest days of my work as a media trainer in India and Africa, you have taught me more than I could ever have learned in other ways. In particular to all those with whom I have collided who have had the courage to talk back, to question my arrogance and push against my hubris. In this resistance has been my learning. Thank you.

To all the writers whose work has stimulated my thinking and challenged my behaviour. Thank you. For too long I have been a consumer. It is now time for me to put something back. This is my response. This is how your ideas have entered my story.

To colleagues from the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice at the University of Bath. At different stages in my journey I have experienced and valued the support and encouragement of my supervision groups. In particular I want to acknowledge the gentle push of Geoff Mead, my supervisor, whose sense of what was emerging in my work was often sharper than my own and whose encouragement to continue living inquiringly has provided momentum and energy to my work. Thank you.

To Wanda, wife, musician, and homemaker. This has been our shared performance. Without her patient encouragement and support this journey could not have been undertaken, and certainly not completed. She has often said she has played second fiddle to a book. Now that the "book" has been written, perhaps I can give her more of my attention.

This story finds its unexpected climax in death. And yet, even in death there is the promise of new beginnings, particularly in the birth of our first grandchild, Ava Grace, whose arrival blessed the closing stages of this journey.





## Chapter One

### Introduction

*But yield who will to their separation,  
My object in living is to unite  
My avocation and my vocation  
As my two eyes make one in sight.*

Robert Frost

*The first step in enchantment, then, is to recover a  
beginner's mind and a child's wonder ... then we may  
discover the nature of the soul and the pleasure of being  
a participant, and not a master, in the extravagance of  
life.*

Thomas Moore (1996)

My fingers hesitate above the keys. I am aware of an uneasy resistance to write. Although I have been on this journey for more than five years so much remains tacit, reluctant to surface and find expression. The period of this inquiry (2004 - 2009) coincides with significant changes in my professional life that were unforeseen when I began.

The story begins on the threshold of my discovery of Action Research. At the time I was directing a successful Masters Degree in Communications Practice designed for professionals working in the media as journalists and programme makers. The programme was attracting students from all over the world - a feature that was

both its strength and liability. Many of the most promising students found the costs prohibitive and, as a result, there were doubts about its long term viability. We could open the programme to more western students, diluting its international character, or re-design it in more cost-effective ways. As Programme Leader I wanted to explore more creative ways of delivering the programme and turned to Action Research.

Working with small cohorts of six to eight mid-career practitioners provided a rich source of experience in curriculum design and adult learning. In giving an account of my inquiry I will describe the overlapping and shifting spheres of influence on my practice that have defined and shaped the dynamic “professional knowledge landscape” (Connelly & Clandinin 1999) on which I have worked. Half way through this period I was invited to build on the experience of the MA to develop a post-graduate (Masters and PhD) programme in Professional Practice. This shifted the focus of my work from a full-time campus based programme to a non-residential, online supported environment; and from facilitating a taught MA, to designing a programme that takes the participant's professional practice as the subject of study and research, privileging their practical knowledge and experience and facilitating a process of action and critical inquiry in their context.

The project was hosted by a small post-graduate research Centre in the UK<sup>1</sup>. Although my formal relationship with the Centre was as a consultant I was fully involved in the work processes of the organisation and I saw my inquiry as an example of insider research (Coghlan & Brannick 2005). I was deeply involved in navigating the micro-political and tactical decisions that are made each day, and the conversations that tilt the work in different directions. However, in the middle of 2008 the project, and with it my relationship to the organisation, began to unravel. By the end of the year I was faced with the complete collapse of the space in which I had worked. I was no longer an insider. This too, of course, is the raw material of professional life and rather than gloss over the pain, the upheaval

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<sup>1</sup> I have chosen not to name the Centre or the colleagues with whom I worked for reasons that will become clear later. See also the section on "Ethical Considerations".

became a central aspect of the closing stages of my inquiry, pushing me deeper into understanding the meaning behind the title I had earlier drafted for the thesis.

I notice how much ground is covered in the last few sentences and am aware that, although the full story will emerge later in the thesis, I need to peel back a little more of the detail. I was both frustrated and hurt by the collapse of the project and for months I found it impossible to write. I could see no value in my earlier achievements, and with them I lost interest in the inquiries. My journal of the time is full of painful attempts to make sense of what was happening. Perhaps in disbelief I was searching for ways of recovering the project but every option was blocked and I wrestled with the demons of anger and sadness. I requested, and was granted, a six month suspension from my research. But, as Samuel Johnson said: "Adversity introduces a man to himself" (in Palumbo 2000, 102). In a book that helped me come to terms with the confusion and uncertainty, Frank (1995) recognises the chaotic nature of the stories told by the wounded storyteller. They have no discernible sequence or plot. It was months before I was able to face the wreckage and find the faith to begin again.

This moment is therefore pivotal. As I now begin to write I am defining my 'self' in the present, enriched by what I have learned on the journey but not limited by the conditions (social or political) of the past. I have stepped into a different time and place than the one in which these lessons were learned. The research is, therefore, no longer just about how I might improve my facilitation of professional learning but also about the qualities of my own action whether inside or outside the system. Rather than pointing the research light on the programme, this experience clearly turned the scrutiny onto my own practice. Perhaps ironically, this has exposed the gap that exists between our formal programmes of professional development and the realities of daily practice, obscuring the promise that our work in the world might bring us to wholeness.

So what began as a quest for improvement in my practice as a learning facilitator has become a deeper inquiry into my way of being in the world. This is what Mary

Catherine Bateson (2004) calls a "learning narrative" (2004, 6), not just a narrative of learning, recognising the significant learning that is involved in the choice of anecdote and plot and in the writing process itself. As the journey began I was searching for my voice. As it ends I am most intensely aware that I write from within the story - as both inquirer (the research instrument) and subject of inquiry. And in the alchemy of this process I give shape to my identity - to write is to 'produce' myself. It is a kind of self-making or self-forming activity (van Manen 1990, 126). To invite someone else to read it is to offer my story as a metaphor of life - or in the case of my purpose in this thesis - a metaphor of professional practice.

Ideas from many sources have entered my life on this journey and I will acknowledge their contribution as appropriate. My reading has been eclectic. I make no claim to be an expert in the fields in which I forage. Yet I cannot avoid the influence these people have had on my practice. They have been my conversation partners. The image I have is of a brief exchange in a busy corridor, catching ideas, sometimes just phrases that connect with my inquiry. Occasionally, like a lengthy conversation over a good meal, or the interactions of long term friendship, their contribution has percolated into my practice in more substantial ways. The choices I have made in the light of their insights, however, are entirely mine. They bear no responsibility for my actions.

My experiences have been captured in a journal, in audio recordings of student seminars and group supervision sessions, emails, and meeting notes, to which I will refer frequently. My purpose has been to witness moments of integrity and presence in fractals of my professional life. I explore these using a palette of inquiry practices that I discuss in detail in the next chapter.

This has not been a straight line inquiry. Mary Oliver captures the two threads that weave through the inquiry in a way only poetry can:

"The path to heaven  
doesn't lie down in flat miles.  
It's in the imagination  
with which you perceive  
this world,  
and the gestures  
with which you honor it."  
(Oliver 1992, 79)

My intention has been to explore ways in which I have come to experience the world (my world) in fresh ways through changes in the way I perceive it. This has involved, at times, a painful dismantling of old ways of seeing and thinking, enabled by a gradual awakening of my imagination. But without "gestures with which to honor (sic)<sup>2</sup> it" these emerging insights would be of little value. The thesis will, therefore, also show how my practice has changed. This is not a simple formula in which I can trace cause and effect, shifts in perception leading to changes in behaviour, but a process of deepening awareness of myself, learning from experience through my action in-the-moment. In the image suggested by Oliver I am still on "the path to heaven" aware of the twists and turns on the way.

So this is where my inquiry has taken me and what I intend to explore in this thesis. But I hesitate. Five minutes pass and the confusion grows. I want to write but I face the screen and nothing comes out. What can I say about what I know? Can I bridge the gap between my experience and this blank screen - with words? If words appear, what kind of account will they provide of the past five years? How will I know their value? How will others judge them? In what way can a string of words be "true"? My hope is to reveal myself, to narrate what I have become and continue to become as a learning facilitator and programme leader. I know this

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<sup>2</sup> I have noted the American spelling in this quotation but will use this footnote to inform the reader that I intend to ignore the difference in spelling in future quotations from American sources.

story is not just my own. Professional colleagues and wider circles of associates have been involved and their contribution to this story cannot be ignored.

There is another factor involved in my hesitation. Although my research has been in my conscious mind for most of the past five years I have confronted a continual tendency to pick up another book or journal article rather than write. The literature I have read has both stimulated and distracted me, sometimes triggering new ideas that I have pursued in my practice, at other times wasting valuable time. Why? I have had to overcome a strong sense that knowledge - at least knowledge that is of value to my purpose - lies "out there", to be discovered in someone else's experience and research. While intellectually excited by the idea that my action in the world is itself a valuable source of knowledge, releasing unique insight into the way things are, I have found it difficult to trust this way of knowing and certainly hesitate to give it form in writing.

Yet I know that I can, and must, write. Although there is a way of knowing, rich and full of colour, that can only be experienced in the moment and is therefore transient, I need to articulate, to connect forms of expression, most often words, to the experience. I realise that the experiences I will describe have passed. Writing about them will create new experiences, for me and for you, the reader. And this form of knowing, what Heron calls 'presentational knowledge' (Heron 1992, 165) can only emerge as I write. So there are feelings of apprehension and excitement as I explore, in this thesis, what I have learned on this journey.

## **Ways of Seeing**

The words, penned by Robert Frost, with which I opened this Introduction, point me in the direction I hope to take. In the past the word "vocation" was used to describe the higher professions, medicine, education or the religious life, for example, and "avocation" referred to the pleasures found away from the job, often in hobbies like writing poetry, sailing or wood carving. Implicit in the term

"avocation" is a tension. Its etymology (with origins in the 16th century) suggests a distraction or diversion (ad, "away" and vocare, "to call") - a calling away from one's occupation. In later use, however, the meanings have been reversed. Avocation now refers to one's work or profession, evidence of the separation of life and work characteristic of the Industrial Revolution. One does not "go to work" to live, but to "make a living", in order to have the resources to pursue one's true vocation away from the factory or office.

So, at the heart of my inquiry and therefore of this thesis, is an attempt to restore the unity between my avocation, my action in the world, and my vocation, what I am becoming, as I explore the questions to which my life is an answer<sup>3</sup>, my vocation informing my action and my avocation yielding knowledge that shapes my vocation. This way of thinking about my research emerged through an incident I will recall in the thesis in which I realised that the key to my professional practice will be found in my search for integrity and presence.

My education and professional background have embedded a purpose-driven avocational orientation in my way of being in the world. Although I am now uncomfortable with it and repent of its influence on my behaviour, I was socialised to view the world in primal chaos waiting for human action to create order. I recognise in this the legacy of the Enlightenment and the inheritance of modernity.

Frost works with the metaphor of sight, two ways of seeing, one shaped by a sense of purpose in the world and the other by action in the world. Unless "my two eyes make one in sight" the world is blurred, and impossible to harmonise. Martin Jay (2005) reminds his readers of the ocular-centric bias of modernity - the dominance of sight over other senses. The design of the telescope and microscope, representative of the instruments employed in the pursuit of knowledge, privileged

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<sup>3</sup> This is a way of thinking about my inquiries suggested by my supervisor, Geoff Mead, and captured in his concept of "living inquiry" (Mead 2001). It has echoes with Rainer Rilke's challenge to love the questions and not seek answers I will be unable to live with: "Live the questions now. Perhaps then someday, without even noticing it, you will live your way into the answer" (Rilke 2004).



the visual, extending its range and producing knowledge at a distance. Sight objectifies the world, locating everything as external to me. Sight constructs my world, placing things at a distance - in front, to the left, right or behind me, above me or beneath me. With reality "in my sight" I am beguiled into a false confidence. It conveys an impression of certainty and encourages action.

The dominance of sight has produced metaphors of certainty. It is commonplace to speak of a "point of view". We speak of "insight" and conduct research in order to "bring to light" knowledge of the object under investigation. But there is a limit to such knowledge. Sight may provide images that are clear and unambiguous but it does not disclose their meaning. "When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree...was pleasing to the eye...she took some and ate it" (Genesis 3:6)<sup>4</sup>. The actions of Adam and Eve in eating the fruit would have consequences which could not be known through what they saw. And, as the story explains, its meaning was contested.

So the prophet Isaiah warns the people in exile not to rely on what they see, since "truth is lost to sight" (Isaiah 59:15), an idea echoed by Jesus: "You cannot tell by observation when the kingdom of God comes. You cannot say 'Look, here it is', or 'There it is!' For the kingdom of God is among you" (Luke 17:20-21). The avocational eye, active in the world, observing all things, must be "one in sight" with my vocation.

Secondly, as Jay (2005) points out, the Cartesian legacy separates everyday sense experience from the increasingly complex explanations of its cause and "the propositional thoughts or linguistic representations that were fashioned from them" (2005, 39). In seeking to interpret the world we are required to represent it,

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<sup>4</sup> Biblical references throughout the thesis are given in the form (book: chapter: verse). I write as a Christian and, as I will explain later in the introduction, I have been surprised by the connections that have emerged between my faith tradition and my inquiry. The quotations are not taken from one particular translation of the Bible - in most cases I have referred to several and present what I hope is the most clear wording of the text.

but once reality has been objectivised it becomes possible to explore its meaning independent of its particular context or specificity. In seeking to make sense of it, it can be examined from different perspectives and described in different ways.

## Labelling and Naming

Like my namesake, Adam, I am called to name the world, to engage in worldmaking (Goodman 1978) by giving it expression - to articulate its presence (to link essence and expression in authentic ways). It is much easier to use a label than find its true name. Labels rip reality from its context, leaving the speaker and hearer with arbitrary signs that float independently of the object that gave them birth. While incredibly useful, once a label or concept is adopted, the reality can be ignored. Anthony de Mello (1990) reminds his readers of the advice, attributed to Krishnamurti: "The day you teach the child the name of the bird, the child will never see the bird again" (1990, 121). The word "leaf" applies to all leaves, not just to the one that continues to hang on the lowest branch of the tree we planted six years ago in the corner of our garden, when all the other "leaves" that kept it company through the summer have been blown away. I just noticed that there are two of them, together facing the wild winds and rain of this January day. What reserves of energy hold them in their place?

Learning to write with integrity has become crucial to my research journey. My media career was in broadcasting and I often reflected on the transient nature of my communication. Sometimes I spoke from a script or an outline and audio recordings still exist in the archive. Most of my writing has been driven by external demands - proposals, position papers, project reports, promotional texts and even an occasional journal article have all flowed onto my screen. But none of this compares to the kind of writing I have done as I have pursued my research inquiry, writing myself into knowing, reflecting on what I have written as it emerges "outside myself" and inquiring into its integrity as self-expression. Working with

the text to explore its hidden and unexpected, and even unintended, meanings. Learning to follow the cursor rather than guide it.

Later I will describe an incident in which I broke through my reluctance to freefall writing (Goldberg 1986). There was something about the process I feared, participating in an activity designed to allow my inner self space for expression, permitting it to emerge on the page without editing or correction. As a broadcaster I have the gift of the gab - I am quite comfortable talking, at length, about subjects that interest me, according to the rules of the radio panel game, *Just a Minute*, without hesitation, repetition or deviation. In speech I am not conscious of an inner editor, checking the vocabulary or logic of my argument. In conversation my ideas flow. Why then do they not flow when I turn to written form or computer text?

Merleau-Ponty talks of experience as possessing a "wild logos" calling for its witness to give it thematic expression through interpretation. Its truth does not exist, ready-made, waiting for formal science to disclose it. Its meaning consists "ultimately of contributions from both the given and the interpreter." (Polkinghorne 1988, 30). "True speech...speech which signifies...frees the meaning captive in the thing" (Merleau-Ponty in Polkinghorne 1988, 30). My aim, therefore, is to find appropriate ways of talking about my experience in this thesis that are authentic and not manipulative - to let it be, in reality, and in language. So, for example, I will have reason to talk about others, students and professional colleagues, in this thesis. At times I will be tempted to describe them with labels, possibly adding adjectives to limit the label, like "African" or "young". But the people I will talk about are more than an "African woman" or a "young colleague" and there are lots of things about these people that are not represented by the label.

Labels betray what Peter Senge (1990) calls the "mental models", the cognitive maps, formed from the stories and assumptions we carry into our relationships with people and institutions, shaping our behaviour in organisations. But it is not

enough to acknowledge their existence or even explore the assumptions that lie behind them. The project that has shaped my inquiry over the past five years has involved significant organisational change and my experience suggests that I need a more dynamic way of talking about how we individually and corporately frame reality and the way this has been challenged, developed and changed through time. I have written discussion documents and convened planning meetings. I organised a collaborative inquiry (Reason 2002, 2003a) involving students and staff. I conceived the notion of "relational inquiry" to describe my attempts to make sense, with colleagues and students, of our experience of organisational change. But as the project developed and I now look back on the process, I believe the main way in which I have navigated organisational realities and relationships has been through conversations, not always explicit in purpose, often serendipitous in outcome. This has not been a solitary process. Sometimes we have collaborated intentionally but often the outcome has been a consequence of simply working alongside others, co-constructing the next moment in the day to day exchange of feelings and experience. As a result we have been carried to a place we did not predict but that has favoured our purpose. I will explore this experience in more detail in the thesis.

Writing in the mist where sight is of limited help, naming reality not labelling it - these are the challenges of aligning my avocation and vocation. And perhaps, here, is the root of my hesitation to hit the keys and fill the screen with words. Writing will lead me to disclose the struggle involved in bringing together my avocation and vocation, the struggle of "two eyes" becoming "one in sight", of finding integrity and presence. As a form of auto-ethnography I agree with Mary Catherine Bateson's observation: "It is not easy to use the crises of one's own life as the stimuli for new ethnographic insights." (Bateson 1994, 27).

## Metaphors of the Journey

So often in professional life I have pressed on with only partial understanding, experiencing what Bateson calls, "the vertigo of doing without answers" (Bateson 1994, 9). I am reminded of a walk in the mountains near Zermatt in Switzerland. It happened more than fifteen years ago. I had been given sabbatical leave from my work and choose to spend a couple of weeks walking in the Swiss mountains. It was early May and the snows had melted on the lower slopes but one day I decided to follow a path higher up and on a part of the mountain exposed to the north. There was still snow on the ground when I exited the train at Riffelalp and headed along the path. At times the path narrowed and I was faced with a drop to my left of several hundred metres. At other times the space widened, creating even more uncertainty. For a time I was unable to find the exact route of the path through the snow and I wondered whether I should turn around. I thought I might meet someone coming from the other direction who could advise me of the way ahead but I was completely alone.

My thoughts turned towards the amazing ability of my eyes, mind and feet to choreograph the movement of my body, adapting instantaneously to changes in the terrain. Most of the time it happens without conscious thought. I am amazed at the many different ways I might put my foot forward and how, with each step, it is able to commit my whole body weight to another unique place on "terra ferma". But because of the uncertainties here on the mountain, my steps were more carefully planned and I often took time to test the ground under the snow before transferring my weight to my foot. My whole being was engaged in exploring, testing and committing myself to the next move. I made slow progress, being careful not to look down into the vast space beneath me.

In everyday life, and with each step, my foot has to come down somewhere, making a split second decision about where and how to settle. Most of the time this occurs without thinking - it is an intuitive action, occasionally brought to my attention by an unexpected obstacle. My thoughts are out ahead, taking in the

surroundings, possibly searching for a glimpse of my destination. Meanwhile my feet are adjusting step by step to the ground beneath and my brain is instantaneously assessing the conditions and coordinating my torso, limbs and feet in an unconscious and apparently effortless balance in motion. Unless I am in unfamiliar territory or dangerous circumstances when I cannot walk by sight alone.

This experience of walking provides a metaphor for my inquiry. Later in the thesis I will discuss some of the complex organisational challenges I have faced in developing the project. I wrestle with the difficulty of staying mindful during what can be quite intense discussions. The terrain seems to be changing continuously and I have often been hesitant to commit my whole being to the interventions I have made. But in the moment I have to respond to a hunch, take the next step and commit myself.

These situations have felt like the snow covered mountain path and the idea of reflecting later on what I might have done has no value. My recall of the details is incomplete and I had no way of knowing whether a different option would have worked out better. When I have tried to "reflect-on-action" I have felt it to be abstract, even contrived, determined by the subconscious selections of my memory and my current intentions. In the moment I must make do with partial understanding.

Other metaphors for my inquiry tumble around in my mind. I have worked with "critical incidents" since first discovering reflective practice and find the idea helpful in getting students to access the knowledge embedded in their experience. Critical incidents occur at moments of disjuncture (Jarvis 1999) when I am conscious of what Whitehead (2005) calls "living contradictions", disruptions in the routines of my life. Over the past five years I have collected accounts in my journal and written of many such incidents. They now lie like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle around me, as I try to make sense of how I/we have organised ourselves and our resources. Sometimes I think I have seen the picture on the box but then this is not a simple puzzle and there are some odd features to it. The image is not finished.

As I look closer, in my imagination, some of the pieces appear blurred and others are blank. It is not clear where they fit, but as I bring them towards one another they seem to change shape and I can see more of the detail. A bigger picture seems to emerge as they slip into one another, forming clusters of meaning. I am tempted to continue to work with individual pieces but I can now see that it is only as they are brought together that I can make sense of them. Although they are images of times past they seem alive, combining/morphing into shapes that contribute to the bigger picture. It feels risky to work with the material of my professional and personal life in this dynamic way.

But it is not the image of a puzzle or a mountain walk that I have chosen to work with. Judi Marshall in an early CARPP<sup>5</sup> workshop talked about the practice of living life as inquiry, using the image of "facing into the wind". I awoke one morning shortly after hearing this image with a sense that the legend of the voyage of St Brendan could offer a useful metaphor of my inquiry. The thought has remained in the background until recently. Although shrouded in hagiography (the first recorded account of his journey dates to 300 years after his death) it is this story that has helped me make sense of my inquiries, providing "epistemic access" to important and interesting aspects of reality (Boyd on the role of metaphors in Ortony 1993, 483). This story seemed able to hold my experiences in a way that honoured their complexity and yet gave them coherence. It has lived alongside, or underneath, my own story, adding perspective and depth to my inquiries. I was with Brendan on the journey and have had numerous liminal experiences when memories of the journey touched a moment in my professional life, or incidents in my inquiry recalled moments in that voyage in search of the Land of Promise.

Brendan felt a call, an urge, to "go into the ocean that brought his country its winds and mists and dazzling sunsets, and to see what lay beyond, the source from which these things came" (Lehane 1994, 71) and set sail with a group of his followers, including some he had not chosen. They sailed into the mist - landing, from time to

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<sup>5</sup> CARPP, The Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice, School of Management, University of Bath, the Centre in which my PhD studies have been located.

time, on islands whose inhabitants provided them food, or offered direction on their journey. They faced dangers at sea and on land yet also experienced remarkable provision by the inhabitants and insight into the purpose of their journey on their circuitous voyage to the Land of Promise. When they finally reached their destination they were shown a great river across which they could not pass - and so returned to the place from which they had begun seven years earlier, wiser, yet with lingering questions of what lay beyond the river.

Brendan took to sea in a curragh, a boat made of hide stretched over a wooden frame and powered by a single sail or two large oars. Brendan and his colleagues were "peregrini" - followers of Christ who believed that they could "find God by wandering". As my inquiry has continued I have found myself aware that most of the time I am "at sea", blown by the wind and pushed by the waves, occasionally pulling against the currents with all my strength at the oar but unsure of my direction in the mist. I have, however, become more intentional in "facing into the wind" and, more aware of the islands on which I/we have been nourished and challenged through the critical incidents that have occurred there. Lahane (1994, 68) describes Brendan's voyage as "a flirtation with the obscure". Severin (Severin 1978, 72) describes it as "an act of faith". Both are apt descriptions for my inquiry. The voyage presented the sailors not only with "challenges from nature but also struggles with their own human topography; wrested from the journey are self-knowledge, patience, courage and compassion" (Green 2005, 124). I am not an experienced sailor and imagine myself starting the journey as a deck hand, but my inquiry has been nourished and deepened by the narrative connections the adventure has provided.

## Thinking and Acting Professionally

The first noun in the title of the thesis is "professional" and I would like to explain the way in which I intend to work with this language. It is one of a set of words, such as profession, professional and professionalism, that, in popular use, define



either a field of regulated public practice, or qualities of performance. The term is frequently used of membership in a group of practitioners with a common vocation and standards of performance who enjoy a high level of autonomy in their work. The traditional professions such as medicine, law and accountancy maintain almost hegemonic control of their field, with authority to sanction their practitioners.

Several writers have recognised a crisis in confidence in professional practice (Schon 1983, 1987; Eraut 1994; Furlong 2000). The crisis has developed along several axes. It has involved a growing uncertainty about the nature of professional knowledge and the relationship between theory and practice. Schon's discussion about the "indeterminate zones of practice" (1987, 6) and the limits of technical rationality threaten any confidence in attempts to control the boundaries of professional knowledge. Similarly autonomy, once deemed the essential privilege of professional practice, has floundered on calls for greater accountability and the introduction of publically recognised benchmarks and targets. In recent decades the fields of practice claiming professional recognition have multiplied, diluting the currency of the term in common use. The concepts "profession" and "professional practice" are, as Shaw (2002) has pointed out, socially constructed. They serve socially useful purposes and "the more professionalized an activity becomes, the more codified" (ibid 96). A discourse of word and deed develops that is elevated above the everyday reality of our lives (Shotter 1993) and legitimises "the kind of causality we will use to articulate the nature of our human agency, the kind of difference we can make, the scope and limitation of our power to influence the evolution of events" (Shaw 2002, 96), rendering the practice political. Writing from an overtly feminist position, Fletcher (1998), for example, observes that "the current definition of work in organizational discourse is a social construction premised on a gendered dichotomy between the public and private spheres of life" (ibid, 165).

Rather than pursue the notion of professional as a term to define a sphere of practice, with its accompanying discourse, however, my intention is to consider its use as a quality of practice. Coles (2002) distinguishes technical work from

professional practice by the judgment that is required. While a technician works to achieve the right solution, the professional seeks the best outcome in circumstances of uncertainty. Referring to Aristotle's notion of *phronesis*, Coles points out that professional practice is recognised by its exercise of practical wisdom. The professional asks not just "what can or might I do now?" but "what ought I to do now?" suggesting "the whole enterprise of professional practice is seen as a form of moral enquiry, utilising practical reasoning and practical wisdom" (Fish & Coles 1998, 284). This is an elusive quality. Professional judgment "leaves no empirical evidence on the surface of practice ... that such judgement has been made, or of the processes involved" (ibid 257), leading Fish and Coles to describe it as "the invisible heart of practice" (ibid 256).

This helps to position my own inquiry and the search for what "being professional by becoming myself" might promise. The thesis does not attempt to wrestle with the nouns, profession or professional, but with the adverbial form of the word. What has emerged from the inquiry is a way of thinking and acting professionally that breaks down the separation between person and performance, private and public, and gives attention to the underlying qualities of being in the world.

## Validity/Quality

I am a practitioner and a storyteller. This may be a dubious claim for the writer of a PhD thesis. Storytellers are not necessarily bound by the facts. Their calling is to weave together the threads of life experience to create an imaginative space where both teller and listener can perceive new insights in the data. But then this is, perhaps, a poetic way of describing what theory-builders also do. A theory is an attempt to pull together the available data in a coherent way so that it may be understood and appropriately used to accomplish worthwhile ends. Even with theory, the question is not about whether it is true or false but whether it can account for the current situation and predict future occurrences of the phenomena. So perhaps what I offer in this thesis is not so far removed from the traditional

thesis than first thought, although it is certainly appropriate to raise questions about the criteria for assessing its validity or quality.

The inquiry falls into the general field of Action Research (Bradbury and Reason 2001a) and, in particular, what Reason and Torbert (2001) call first person inquiry. I describe in detail the approaches I have used in the inquiry in the next chapter. By way of introduction I suggest that the notion of validity, as proposed by positivist research, is too limiting as the criteria for assessing Action Research (AR) because it requires the assessment to meet epistemological standards that include “the trustworthiness of inferences drawn from the data” (internal validity) and “how well these inferences generalize to a larger population or are transferable to other contexts” (external validity) (Herr & Anderson 2005, 50). This assumes a correspondence notion of truth, that words correspond to the world they describe. But this theory of truth “landed the social sciences in a country of things, where nouns (names) matter most. It has been assumed that, once you get your metaphors right, the story will tell itself” (Czarniawska 2004, 134).

Of more immediate consequence, this form of validation raises awkward questions about contamination since I, as the researcher, am deeply embedded in the inquiry and struggle to see the taken-for-granted aspects of my practice from an outsider perspective (Herr & Anderson 2005, 50). For some, this raises doubts about the value of AR as a source of public knowledge. AR is acceptable as a form of local knowledge that may lead to change in the practice setting itself, but not “when it is presented as public knowledge with epistemic claims beyond the practice setting” (ibid 52). Accusations of solipsism have haunted me throughout this work, fuelled in the final stages by a new Dean that frequently questioned AR as idiosyncratic and self-indulgent. Has it all been a grand self-delusion? I find some support in the exercise of critical subjectivity (Reason 1994) that has its echo in what Margaret Mead, the respected ethnographer called “disciplined subjectivity”, the intentional inclusion of my subjective responses as data in the inquiry. As Mary Catherine Bateson (2004), her daughter, suggests, “The problem is not to resist falling in love. The problem is to fall in love and be wiser thereby” (2004, 42). Marshall (2001)

describes the practice of tracking “inner” and “outer” arcs of attention as a way of accounting for subjectivity. Ladkin (2005) offers a phenomenological perspective on subjectivity, arguing that curiosity and attention to the “other”, enabling the phenomena to “speak for themselves” without interpretation or framing, recognises the interdependence of objective and subjective in the creation of knowledge.

Flyvbjerg (2006) offers a vigorous defence of the single case. “Good narratives ... may be difficult or impossible to summarize into neat scientific formulae, general proposition, and theories.” (2006, 237) he argues. Theory may be more useful to the novice. Case researchers are sceptical about “erasing phenomenological detail in favour of conceptual closure” (ibid 240). Moore (1996), in his call for the re-enchantment of everyday life, regrets the loss of the single case. “In our day ... we don’t trust the single case, or even a duplication, but trust only infinitely repeatable events. In almost every field a student has to learn how to do statistical analysis, because we rely more on repetition than on rarity” (1996, 361).

There is another aspect to the question of the single case in AR. In a debate, conducted in the pages of the journal *Concepts and Transformations*, several prominent AR scholars respond to arguments put by Bjorn Gustavsen and Davydd Greenwood, addressing the limited influence of AR on the social sciences. Reason (2003b) responds to Gustavsen’s argument that AR should place its emphasis on the creation of social movements rather than single cases, by showing the necessity for personal and small group inquiry practices at the roots of wider social change. In my view, since AR is not first of all about proving things but about improving them there will always be an aspiration for social movements yet, as Reason argues, these must be rooted in the quality of personal and small group inquiry. It is my expectation, therefore, that changes to the way we support professional development in the workplace will come through the cumulative effect of individual cases. Reason offers the analogy of homeopathy, a small dose aiding the self-healing of the whole. This is happening first outside the institutions of higher learning where we are seeing,

“action research not primarily as a form of social science producing cases or influencing policies, but as a form of day-to-day collaborative inquiry at the moment of action for individuals, small groups, organizations, and society as a whole, an enormous groundswell for change” (Reason 2003b, 291).

The limitations of positivist attempts to understand the human world has resulted in a shift from knowledge viewed as a mirror of reality, to a discursive, socially constructed reality, valid knowledge claims being negotiated among members of a community (Kvale 1995). Without a correspondence criterion of knowledge the researcher can no longer rely on method to secure validity. This leads Kvale to propose that validity in post-modern inquiry is located in the quality of craftsmanship evident in the work, introducing aesthetics and communication skill as criteria and raising questions about the integrity of the researcher (ibid). Of particular interest to an action researcher is the notion of pragmatic validity - the connection between claims to knowledge and the resulting change in behaviour that it leads to. This raises critical questions about purpose and power, concerns that were never on the radar screen in the traditional ways of thinking about validity.

As the bandwidth of validity (Bradbury & Reason 2001b) has broadened, the language of assessment has changed. Marshall and Reason (2007) write of “quality” that includes attention to framing, different ways of knowing, power, and emergence. These criteria suggest a useful way of reading this thesis. Throughout the inquiry I have been conscious of stepping back, zooming out and in, noticing the different insights that come from the ways I frame the inquiry in the moment, attempting to practice the multi-dimensional attention that Torbert calls “supervision” (Torbert 2004). This is much easier, of course, when reflecting “on” action than “in” action. I have wrestled with questions of power, my own power-over (both given and taken) and power-with, and my responses to the power present in subtle ways in the systems in which I worked. I have faced the limits of reason and reached for what Pascal describes as the “wise ignorance” of someone

who truly knows this. Several incidents recorded in the thesis describe the ways in which emotional and embodied ways of knowing have influenced my actions.

Perhaps most significant, for me, however, has been the emergent nature of my inquiry. I have experienced this at two levels. Each cycle of inquiry has involved a dynamic interaction of experience, personal reflection, and ideas from other sources, influencing one another in often unexpected ways. And, at the macro level, I have been carried by the narrative process to experience each cycle building on the previous one. Readers will probably discern a different quality in my writing as the thesis progresses. I could have evened this out with careful editing but I feel this is important as evidence of emergence. I have come to know as I have written and while in one sense the knowledge is cumulative, in another I want to recognise a provisionality to all forms of practical knowing.

As understandings of validity in qualitative research and action research have developed it is reassuring to see the researcher ascending from the obscurity of objective inquiry. As a first-person inquiry I have found my attention increasingly focussed on myself and the qualities of integrity and presence involved in my practice. My relational practice and presence have become central themes of this inquiry. These are the qualities of “becoming rather than being” (Marshall & Reason 2007, 369), that, to borrow the utopian dream posed by Kvale, may lead to a world where we no longer “have to continually pose questions of validity” (Kvale 1995, 38).

The holy grail of positivist research was, of course, generalisability, the expectation that the theory/story that explains the data in the current situation might predict future occurrences of the phenomena. I make no such claims for this story. However, this does not restrict its value. Schon (1983) writes of the “reflective transfer” of practitioner knowledge, and Greenwood & Levin (1998) describe the “transcontextual credibility” of AR. A key quality in this process is verisimilitude (Bruner 1991, Ellis & Bochner 2000), the possibility of “evoking a feeling that the experience is lifelike, believable, possible” (Ellis & Bochner 2000, 751). Validity,

depends, in this sense, “on the narrative speaking to the experience of others” (Mason 2002, 175), judged not by some external criteria but by the way it moves you as the reader and the integrity you sense as you enter into the story.

I would like to make this more specific and personal. This thesis is autobiographical. It is a personal (auto) narrative of my lived experience (bios). But it is more than this. It is a written account (graphia). As such it purports to represent my lived experience, raising important questions about form and presentation. The complex transfer of experience to words involves critical reflection on the creation of knowledge and it is here that I suggest, questions of quality are relevant. Emerging in this thesis, as you read it, are themes that lay hidden, moments before they arrived on my screen. I am not suggesting that an invisible hand is responsible for the thesis but, to follow Laurel Richardson (1994), “writing as inquiry” discloses perspectives on my life I had not expected. I could have edited some of this disclosure out. Once written these words will remain undisturbed long after I have moved on and even forgotten them, and they may turn up in unexpected places. This makes me ponder, briefly, how you as my reader may approach the text. Although we may only meet briefly in the viva, or never encounter one another face to face, this writing is a gesture, an invitation to dialogue. Can I therefore suggest a few questions, beyond those that have already surfaced in this Introduction, that you may like to bring to your reading? You will, I am sure, also have your own and this will deepen and carry forward the conversation beyond the page, in the spirit of collaborative inquiry.

Ricoeur (1981) suggests that reading a text is an active process that involves the recovery of meaning by the reader. In the light of your professional experience what connections are you making with the thesis?

In what ways does the narrative description of my journey towards integrity and presence resonate with your experience?

Does the thesis suggest, to you, ways of enabling professional development that reach this level of self-awareness and personal transformation?

Whether you are a member of my religious tradition or not, is there a sense in which you are moved spiritually as you engage with my story?

This journey has brought me face to face with the limits of rationality and a tendency towards hubris in my professional practice. As you wrestle with the text what insights emerge from your reflection on these features of professional practice?

My first intentions in adopting an AR approach to my practice was to improve it. Only gradually have I come to see my responsibility in the world, not just in terms of solving the presenting problem of the day or hour, but of giving attention to the wider questions of how my action affects the world. The outcome is a story of professional practice. I do not claim to have mapped the territory or developed a theory of personal or organisational change. What I offer is more modest - a way of thinking and acting in the world that I believe has more integrity and presence. This does however suggest, to me, ways of thinking about professional practice that are closer to the lived experience of the practitioner, and therefore offers ways of supporting professional development in practice.

## **Ethical Considerations**

In the early stages of my research I decided to work within the conventional codes of ethical research. I would be working with human participants and so decided to secure written consent from students and colleagues involved in the groups I was facilitating. We talked about my research plans and I obtained agreement to record seminars and quote individuals in my writing. I offered a degree of anonymity by promising to use individual initials rather than names but



participants knew that the groups were small and others would easily be able to identify my sources.

Informed consent is one of the almost sacred requirements of social research. As my work grew I sought guidance from published sources including the University of Bath School of Management "Ethical Implications of Research Activity", the Open University "Ethical Principles for Research Involving Human Participants" and, The Economic and Social Research Council Research Ethics Framework<sup>6</sup>. Most codes of practice are written to ensure that the participant understands the purpose, methods and possible risks involved and the researcher is expected to balance the benefits and potential risks in designing the research and handling the data. I became aware from these guidelines, for example, of the issue of data protection since information from my sources is stored in audio files, journal entries and handwritten notebooks.

The Economic and Social Research Council Research (ESRC) Ethics Framework presents the standard research ethics guidelines and then acknowledges:

"Methodologies based on participatory, action-oriented techniques also raise questions about the practice of ethics-based social science, especially where there is a strong commitment to qualitative research. Ethics review of qualitative research needs to attend to the iterative and uncertain character of this research process. It must demand the same ethical standards as other approaches while accepting that outcomes and measures of risk or benefit may be less easily defined before the start of the research." (p28)

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<sup>6</sup> Accessed at:

[<http://www.bath.ac.uk/internal/management/pdf/EIRA1.pdf>]

[<http://www.open.ac.uk/research/research-school/resources/policy-information-governance.php>]

[[http://www.esrc.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/Images/ESRC\\_Re\\_Ethics\\_Frame\\_tcm6-11291.pdf](http://www.esrc.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/Images/ESRC_Re_Ethics_Frame_tcm6-11291.pdf)]

In other words, while there is an acknowledgement that iterative inquiry is more messy, the ESRC framework still insists that the same standards apply.

I have taken a pragmatic approach on anonymity and confidentiality. For the first four years of this inquiry I was an insider and was conscious that my account of critical incidents might not only affect my role in the organisation but may also have influenced organisational dynamics. As it happens I no longer work for the institutions that provided the context for my inquiries and I have chosen not to identify them in the thesis. I have changed the names of all participants<sup>7</sup>, or identified them in transcriptions with initials, and have tried to avoid attributing intention or motivation to their actions. Those close to the story may be able to identify places and individuals, but I doubt that this would add significantly to their understanding.

As the work has become more clearly a first person inquiry, the ethics of my research has merged into my overall inquiry purpose. I do have concerns about the way I represent others. The kind of inquiry pursued in this thesis inevitably weaves itself around and between others. Their actions have been deeply entwined with mine. I cannot offer an account of my professional development without drawing them into my story. In telling of the action of others (including their speech) I am selecting and interpreting.

I have, however, chosen not to seek agreement on the accounts I provide in the thesis. This is about me, not about others. It is about how I interpreted situations and the action of others and how this influenced my actions. I imagine others would tell a different story. There is no “objective” account of these incidents. This is about the sensations I experienced, the sense I made of them and the choices this led me to. As the inquiry turned inward I was forced to face the inadequacy of my ways of thinking - partial, prejudiced and ignorant. I lost my innocence. No

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<sup>7</sup> With the exception of my supervisor, Dr Geoff Mead, and members of my CARPP supervision group, whose involvement has been so important to this inquiry that I want to acknowledge their contribution.

longer can I take for granted that my initial insight is valid. But in my professional life what matters is what takes me forward as I seek to translate my values into action. So, in as much as my reading of the behaviour of others influenced my actions, this interpretation is valid (even if, in the opinion of others involved, I got it wrong). It shaped my action in the situation.

I have adopted a narrative form for the thesis and narrative structure, or plot, is a way of sense making or theorising. I have chosen particular incidents or moments to tell this story and recorded my sense making and action. Many are learning moments which have an edge to them of the unexpected, uncomfortable or disturbing. But this is my narrative, my plot. It is not merely a record of what happened (if this was even possible to provide) and, following Bruner (1990):

"It does not matter whether the account conforms to what others might say who were witnesses, nor are we in pursuit of such ontologically obscure issues as whether the account is "self-deceptive" or "true". Our interest, rather, is only in what one person thought he did, what he thought he was doing it for, what kinds of plights he thought he was in, and so on." (1990, 119)

Nevertheless, central to my approach is a desire to handle my encounters with others with reverence and respect. In Chapter Four I explore my emerging understanding of relational inquiry and suggest that the old-fashioned virtue of reverence is essential to knowing with and through others. This relational attitude is expressed in gestures and simple ceremony. There isn't a single truth or definitive account of the encounters and mine may differ radically from others, but this is the way I experienced them and acted as a consequence. So the ethical question has become, in itself, an inquiry; what does a respectful, reverential attitude to others I have encountered in my inquiry look like in practice?

I aspire to give an account of this period of my professional life in a way that permits me to continue to gaze into the eyes of those I have worked with. Drawing

from the work of Levinas, Pamela Cooper-White (2007) says, "We cannot use, degrade, or objectify another if we truly see his or her face" (2007, 44). This is the ethical standard I have sought to maintain. I seek truth in my encounter with the other. I may have felt angry, frustrated and even betrayed and I have found it, at times, to be an incredibly difficult emotional experience. Although I may be tempted to colonise other stories, individual and institutional, for my purposes, they are not mine to tell and my reader may therefore sense restraint in what I say. But this tension is a healthy one and forms an inquiry path through the thesis. This is my story and where others appear I have tried to include them respectfully and with reverence. In giving expression to my action in the world and recognising my encounter with others as central to my sense making, the thesis can be read as an account of the ethics of my professional practice.

## The Thesis

The thesis is a first person narrative inquiry that traces my professional practice over a five year period from 2004 to 2009. The title for the thesis came as a gift in a brief exercise of freefall writing (Goldberg 1986) when, for a fleeting moment, my inner self was able to escape the censorship of the ego. It has proved to be a strong and lasting focus to the inquiry. I have borrowed the titles for chapters three to five from a little book "on life and living" by Richard Bode (1993) since they capture succinctly my own journey. I had to discover that I could not improve my performance on the high seas of organisational life before I had learned "the relationship between myself and the elements over which I had no control" (1993, 3). I started the journey, learning to keep my balance in a flat bottomed boat, discovering how difficult it really is to work the oars, sitting with my destination behind me, and judging "where I was going from where I had been" (ibid, 13).

I have employed a palette of approaches to inquiry, including action inquiry, relational inquiry and systemic inquiry, that I describe in detail in Chapter Two. This material was first drafted as an introduction to the thesis but as the discussion

developed it seemed more appropriate to offer it in a separate chapter to provide a more substantial framing of the inquiry. In Chapter Two I acknowledge the way in which my encounter with reality trips up my naive assumptions and opens up the possibility of greater insight and wider horizons. It begins to show how I move between action and reflection, opening up my inquiry practice to scrutiny.

I first conceived the thesis in terms of three movements, or cycles of inquiry, that took me deeper into my research. The first, now offered as Chapter Three, describes my early experiences of action inquiry as a programme leader and learning facilitator. It begins at the beginning as I wrestle with my positivist grounding and technical orientation. Gradually, as I gave attention to my practice working with post-graduate students who knew more about their practice than I did, my appreciation for other sources of knowledge and different ways of knowing developed and I caught the first glimpse of the illusive quality that became central to my inquiry - my own presence. This leads me to reflect on critical incidents in which I was confronted with the split between mind and body, rationality and feeling.

Chapter Four, the second movement in the journey, gives an account of my increasing responsibility in managing Master's programmes and the choices I faced in using positional power to achieve productive ends. As my inquiry progressed I launched a collaborative inquiry that opened up questions about post-graduate research and personal values. As I became aware of the difficulties of engaging in intention inquiry with others on a regular basis I began to explore what I call "relational inquiry" to knowing in practice. Again a critical incident, this time in my supervision group, pushed me to address questions of control and I conclude this movement with reflections on a clowning workshop and the virtue of reverence as a corrective to hubris.

The inquiry, to this point, might have turned into a victory narrative. I had begun to introduce changes to my practice as a learning facilitator, had been invited to take responsibility for a new Post-graduate Programme in Professional Practice, and

had secured the partnership of a well known university in London. I begin Chapter Five by describing the ways in which the inquiry had begun to reshape my practice as a programme leader and learning facilitator before I found myself without a job and outside the context in which I had conducted the inquiry up to that time. Unexpectedly, and as a result of changes beyond our control, the university pulled out of the relationship after we had recruited the first cohort of students and my contract was cancelled. Chapter Five describes the experience of thinking and acting in the daily reality of these systems, and the trauma of coping with the death of a project in which I had invested so much of my time and energy. Slowly, as the sadness and anger subsided, I was able to see again and looked out across a different horizon that evoked a new consciousness, not contained by physical or systemic limits, that has taken me closer to understanding the meaning of integrity and presence in practice.

Chapter Six, the final chapter, offers a series of meta-reflections on the journey. What have I learned on the way? I had started the voyage with a clear purpose, to improve my practice as a programme leader and learning facilitator, but I had set out to take an attitude of inquiry to my practice and as the circumstances changed I found myself confronted with what lies beneath the activities of professional life - the quality of integrity and presence that I brought to my work. After the project collapsed and I was without work all that remained was myself. But what do I mean by becoming myself?

In addition to the three movements, focused on different axes of inquiry, there are three other dimensions of inquiry that have played an important role in the thesis. Firstly, until I began to write the thesis my experience lay in piles of apparently unconnected anecdotes, notes and journal scribbles. As I have attempted to name reality in written form I have written myself towards understanding (Richardson 1994). Secondly, the thesis is autobiographical, offering an account of my professional life in narrative form. Anecdotes have been selected and sequenced with narrative purpose, the plot giving shape to an emerging understanding of my

theme. This not only gives me the opportunity to think *about* stories but also to think *with* stories, bringing diachronic coherence to the inquiry.

Thirdly, I also describe the inquiry as a religious quest. This has come to prominence as the inquiry has developed and I have found connections between my experience and faith. I use the term "religious" to include notions of spirituality but also to root it in my own faith tradition as a Christian. I have been surprised by associations and insights that interact with the inquiry in numerous ways. My faith is enriched, and I sense my understanding of professional practice has also been stretched, as I engage in theological reflection on the journey. Several authors have recognised the holistic nature of action inquiry (Barber 2005) and some have explored the spiritual dimensions of Action Research (Torbert 1991; Heron 1992, 1998, 2006; Reason 1993, 2000; Chuaprapaisilp 2002; Coghlan 2005, 2008; Nolan 2005). Nolan (2005) and Coghlan (2005) have demonstrated how they have related their personal faith and spiritual practices to their inquiries. I warm to Coghlan's (2005) recognition that "research into one's spirituality is potentially personally transforming and so, in my view, is congruent with action research" (2005, 91).

Although the period of the inquiry has ended, the inquiry itself is unfinished. The final chapter identifies untrodden paths and acknowledges the provisional nature of my conclusions. I also list, in the conclusion, a number of directions I intend to pursue to develop and deepen the insights I have gained from the journey. In the meantime I sense that I have become more intentional in thinking and acting with integrity and presence, and found hope in what, through my action in the world, I am becoming. It is in this light that I offer the thesis as a contribution to narrowing the gap between the rhetoric and pedagogy of professional development and the experience of professional practice.

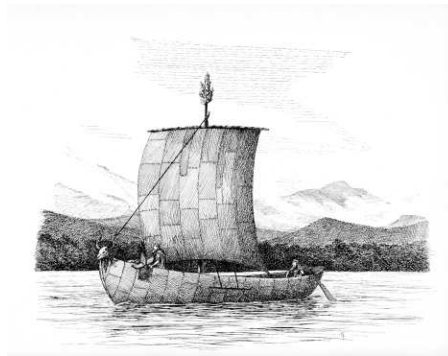
I invite you to begin the journey by accompanying me on the Voyage with St Brendan.





## Interlude

### The Voyage with Brendan



I am not an experienced sailor although I was born near the sea and spent my childhood living at the mouth of the River Mersey. The opportunity to sail with Brendan therefore would pose a challenge for me. The job of a sailor is a physical one. Most of my professional life has demanded mental rather than physical skills and, as I contemplate the journey, I anticipate plenty of sore muscles and bodily tiredness. I crossed the Atlantic in both directions by ship in the years before the 747 jumbo jet transformed the convenience and speed of trans-atlantic travel. Although the Queen Elizabeth II was such a huge ship compared to Brendan's curragh, the sea was unmerciful and I spent days below deck with sea sickness. I have no idea how I would have survived the journey with Brendan.

However, the Brendan story has served as a liberating structure for my professional inquiries, in a similar way to Torbert's experience with the *I Ching* (Torbert 1991). It has provided the imaginative space in which to play with my experience. At different places in the thesis, and particularly as I draw its threads together at the end, I allude to the story and find it a powerful metaphor of my own journey.

The decision about how to position myself in relation to the story was helped by an invitation from Geoff, my supervisor, to tell the story to my CARPP supervision group in April 2008. In the days before, I read over the story many times, trying to memorise the details. As I drove across the Cotswolds towards Bath that morning I was rehearsing the sequence of the story in my mind when I realised that I was telling it as if I was reading it from a book. While the detail may be accurate I was talking *about* Brendan and his voyage. I felt an urge to get into the boat and tell the story as a personal odyssey. My silent rehearsal changed as I imagined myself invited by Brendan to join him on his quest. A couple of hours later I invited the supervision group to listen to *my* journey with Brendan. It was a hesitant performance and I found my presence in the story coming and going but the decision had been made. This was to become my story.

In narrating the story here I intend to remain close to the accounts handed down over the centuries since Brendan lived<sup>8</sup>. The Annals of Inisfarren record Brendan's birth in the year 486 and he is thought to have died around 575. Many believe that he was the first to discover America and the legend was certainly an inspiration to Christopher Columbus when he set sail into the western seas almost a thousand years later. I have been helped in imagining myself as one of Brendan's crew by Tim Severin's (1978) account of his re-enactment of Brendan's Voyage. Severin's graphic descriptions of building a boat using sixth century materials and design, and facing the ferocious seas of the North Atlantic to re-trace Brendan's journey add rich detail to the legend.

Are you sitting comfortably ... ?

The storms had been swept away by a cold westerly gale blowing in from the sea. From our vantage point we could see for miles, the sea and sky joining at the thin, pencil line of the horizon. We saw Brendan in the distance as he came down from the mountain deep in thought. He had been gone for several days of solitude and

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<sup>8</sup> For a critical bibliography of Brendan's Voyage see Burgess and Strijbosch (2000)

prayer. Later that evening he gestured out to sea as he enthusiastically told us of his plan to go in search of the Land of Promise. He wanted us to join him.

Each of us have our own tale to tell of how we came to be with Brendan. We were just following our calling, or at least what we thought of as “our calling.” In our own way we had a deep longing to belong, to be at one with the world and its creator. It was as if the very nature of the world was an invitation for us to journey and discover it. We had joined ourselves to Brendan, ready to listen and learn from him as an older, more experienced, *perigrini*.<sup>9</sup>

Our first task was to build the boat that would carry us on our voyage. We searched for the best materials: timber to create the frame, skins to cover it, and the tar and grease to make it waterproof. I had never built a boat before and at first I watched in amazement at the skill of others, stripping the wicker branches and stretching them into shape, cutting the thick leather skins and piercing them ready for lashing to the frame. As I watched closely and asked questions my confidence grew. Slowly the boat took shape and I was ready to put my hand to the task, helping stitch the thick leathers together. It was hard work, punching a hole through the thick skin and running the blunt needle through it before the leather closed around the hole. I would break several needles and prick my fingers frequently until my hands were a mass of cuts and bruises.<sup>10</sup> We had no idea how long the journey would be but Brendan told us that we should carry enough supplies for fifteen days. Finding space to store food and water, as well as replacement hides and tools in case we needed to repair the boat, was a challenge. But eventually we were ready.

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<sup>9</sup> Peregrini was the name given to people who sought to learn the ways of God through wandering. In this vocation I notice a connection with the punishment given to Cain for the murder of his brother Abel (Genesis 3). He was “sent out into the land of Nod” - the word Nod also meaning “wandering.” Perhaps our calling was to relive this vagabond existence.

<sup>10</sup> Severin (1978, 45)

Just before our departure two strangers appeared at the water's edge, begging Brendan to let them join us. We were none too pleased to have to squeeze two more people onto the already crowded boat. They had done nothing to prepare for the journey and the sores on my hands and my aching muscles were screaming "that's not fair", but Brendan insisted. Fools, we called them behind their back. We'd make sure they paid their dues on the journey.

We sailed into a strong wind and for several days had no need of navigation. We began to settle into a routine, each of us taking turns at the helm or on the oars, others preparing the food or bailing water. Slowly, as we ploughed the waves, hour by hour and day by day, my actions became instructive. I felt more confident and was able to pull my weight alongside the rest of the crew. Sleeping was difficult. We had to sleep crouched where we sat trying to block out the sound of the constant creaks and groans of the wood and leather of the boat, the howl of the wind and the pelter of rain on our clothes, and the squeal of birds hovering above.

After almost two weeks at sea the wind dropped and we were forced to pull out the oars. By this time we had left the shoreline far in the distance and it soon became clear that we had no idea of the direction we should be pursuing. Our water supplies were running low and it became urgent that we find land. Brendan however, told us to pull in the oars and let the currents carry us where they willed. All we could do was bide our time waiting for the wind to turn again in our favour. There was nothing else we could do.

Days past and it seemed that we were drifting nowhere. Then, one morning, in the distance, we glimpsed an island. We put out the oars to pull ourselves closer. As we approached we could see it was surrounded by high cliffs from which poured streams of crystal clear water. But it was impossible to land and although we tried to come near the cliff so that we could hold out our cups to fill them from the spray it was too treacherous. Despite our desperate thirst it took us three days to find a tiny inlet where we were able to pull ashore. We were greeted by a dog who guided us up the slopes of the hillside to a settlement and into a great hall in which

there was a table set out with food and drink. For three days we ate and slept without seeing anyone, although each morning the food had been replenished.

We could have stayed longer but Brendan decided it was time to return to the sea and as we left the settlement he warned us not to take anything with us. We clambered into the boat with a fair wind blowing, promising us good passage on our journey. But as we pulled out of the tiny harbour the wind died down and we were unable to make progress. There were times when Brendan had an uncanny ability to know what was happening and on this occasion he instructed us to return to the shore telling us that one of us had not heeded his instructions and was carrying something they had stolen from the settlement. We would not be able to leave the island until it was returned. One of the fools who had joined us late fell at Brendan's feet and pulled from inside his tunic a silver necklace. We quickly returned to the shore. While the fool climbed the hillside to return the necklace a young boy came along the beach carrying bread and water - enough, he said, to carry us to our next destination.

We had sailed for many days and again were growing weary. In these conditions tedium became our worst enemy. Most of the time there was little idle conversation between us. We tended to keep our opinion to ourselves, reacting in our own way to events. Early one morning lying right in front of us was a small, flat and barren island. We were relieved to be able to get out of the boat. I was delighted to be able to stretch my legs and began to run backwards and forwards across the length of the island kicking my heels high in the air. Some of my colleagues lit a fire to cook a meal but as the cauldron began to boil the island started to move, at first with a small tremor and then to shake. We scrambled back onto the boat just as the island slithered off and dived into the waves, the fire still burning on its back. Brendan had a wry smile on his face. He had remained in the boat because, he told us, he knew this was not a island but the great fish of the sea, Jasconius.

Jasconius returned several times during our voyage, often accompanying us on our way. The burn on his back had healed and he seemed pleased to see us. He it was who showed us the way to a hilly, wooded island where we landed close to a stream. We followed it up to its source almost a mile from the shore where we found a tree covered with the most beautiful birds whose plumage was made of the purest white feathers. It was Easter and we prepared to celebrate when one of the birds flew from the tree and landed on Brendan's shoulder. The sound of his wings as he flew were "like the pealing of tiny bells."<sup>11</sup> It seemed that Brendan could understand their sound for he told us later that these birds were the "survivors of an ancient battle between the angels of light and dark."<sup>12</sup> Because they had not taken sides they had been condemned to travel in spirit form, only being permitted to take shape as white birds on holy days.

We had no idea when we left this island that we would be at sea for three months. The weather was often wild and we saw no land. One day, without warning, the wind turned against us and picked up strength. The sea became menacing, huge swells gathering around us, appearing like advancing hills of water. They say that the seventh wave is the worst, the one that does the real damage<sup>13</sup>. Clinging to the helm of our small open boat in the heaving waters of the storm it is inevitable that you begin to count the waves, perhaps in a way trying to anticipate the next one that threatens to overwhelm you. I could see it coming, becoming steeper and steeper as it came towards us until it could no longer support its own mass, its crest breaking just before it hit the boat with huge force, shaking everything in it. Although we'd been at sea for months and I had gained a lot of experience, every wave was different. We had to respond in the moment to whatever the sea hurled at us. Would the thread holding the leather hides hold? Could the timber skeleton remain intact as it was repeatedly lifted out of the water, suspended precariously in the air, before being released to crash back down into the hollow of the next wave?

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<sup>11</sup> Matthews (1998, 11)

<sup>12</sup> Matthews (1998, 11)

<sup>13</sup> Severin (1978, 168-169, 1)

When, eventually, we sighted land we were so exhausted we could hardly row against the unfavourable wind to reach the shore. When we did finally stagger ashore we were greeted by an elderly monk who gestured us to follow him. We entered a simple settlement where we were welcomed by eleven monks who silently washed our feet and offered us a meal of sweet roots and white bread. Nothing had felt so refreshing or tasted so good. After we had eaten the elder broke their silence briefly to explain that they had been on the island for eighty years where they lived in silence, listening only to the inner voice of God. We were taken to visit their church, a square structure with twenty four seats arranged around the walls. While we sat quietly in the space as dusk fell, suddenly a fiery arrow sped through a window, touching the lamps before it sped out again. We were told that this happened every evening. The lamps are lit and bread is always replenished in the larder. It felt like heaven after our weeks of struggle against the wind and waves and I slept soundly that night.

Several days passed before there was an improvement in the weather and Brendan decided we should continue our journey. We loaded a supply of bread and water and set sail. The sea treated us kindly and we made good progress over the next few weeks. We tended to keep ourselves to ourselves at sea, most of the time wrapped in our own thoughts. There were many small irritations that could have erupted into blazing quarrels but we held our tongues and kept our tempers. We had been sailing for several weeks when we came to a small, apparently deserted, island. Near the shore we found a well surrounded by plants and roots and a stream in which lived numerous fish. We drank from the well, some of us one cup, some two and some three and then we slept, some for one day, others for two and some for three. The water had made us drowsy and we left the island hurriedly, our supplies un-replenished. Fortunately it was raining and we were able to catch the rain on sheets of waterproof cloth and drain it into our cooking pots while we were at sea.

The wind and rain died down after three days and the currents gently carried us back in the direction from which we had come towards the island of white birds

where again we celebrated Easter. When the feast days were over we left to continue our journey, soon to find ourselves on a flat and treeless island on which there were three choirs - one of boys, one of youths and a third of elders. They would take it in turns to fill the island with their singing. We ate and slept, to the sound of music. In the morning when we awoke one of the leaders of the choirs came to meet us and offered us a basket of purple fruit and asked us to leave behind one of our number to replace a member of their choir that had recently died. Brendan turned to the one who had been the last to join our company - the one we called a "Fool" and with tears in his eyes he stepped forward to take the place.

We carried the basket of the fruit with us. Each one was the size of a large ball and full of juice that tasted like honey - enough to feed a man for 12 days. We left the island with music in our hearts and a song on our lips. We were sailing across a stretch of shallow sea and the water was so clear we could see great shoals of fish swimming around the boat gathered as if to listen to our singing.

The temperature began to drop and we were now sailing in colder waters. Slowly at first we could see in the distance what looked like a spike poking out of the sea but as we sailed towards it, it became taller and wider. It seem to reach to the sky, so high that we thought we must be coming close, although it was still three days away. Its sides were like sheer walls of clear crystal glistening in the light. It took a day to sail around one side of the great pillar. On one side we came to a hollow through which the boat could pass and, emerging on the other side we saw a chalice and paten sitting on a small ledge within reach of the boat. It was as if we had been invited to celebrate the Eucharist on this magical island.

But if this island filled us with amazement this soon turned to fear. The wind had changed direction and was driving us straight towards a dark stony island covered with slag and full of smiths' forges. For the first time on our journey Brendan wanted to avoid a landing, "This island worries me," he said, "I do not want to go on



to it nor even get near it. But the wind is driving us straight towards it.”<sup>14</sup> As we came closer we could hear the sound of bellows and the thud of hammers on iron and anvil. One of the blacksmiths turned in our direction and, seeing us approaching, hurriedly grabbed a lump of slag to hurl in our direction. We quickly took out the oars to turn the boat around and row as hard as we could against the wind and tide as other smiths joined the first, great balls of molten slag hissing as they landed in the water around us. It was as if the sea was boiling, smoke and steam rising from its surface, accompanied by a great stench. Eventually, more than a mile from the land, we were able to slow the pace, exhausted. It felt like we had been to the edge of hell.

Three days passed before we came upon a small, circular island about two hundred yards in circumference. Its top was bare. Brendan climbed onto the island where he found a small cave with a tiny spring of fresh water at its mouth. In the cave he met an ancient monk who had served St Patrick. When Patrick died his ghost had told him to set out to sea on his own and he would be taken to the place where he belonged. This was where he arrived. Every three days an otter brought him firewood and some fish and he had lived here for thirty years. Brendan received the old man’s blessing and assurance that, in forty days, we would again reach the island of birds from which, this time, we would begin the last stage of our journey.

Just as the old monk had promised we found ourselves for the last time on the island of white birds. Again we were enthralled by their brilliant white plumage and the delicate bell-like sound of their wings when they flew. Each time we had visited, one of the birds had landed on Brendan’s shoulder and it was as if they spoke to one another. After their conversation, Brendan knew what to do next, leading us back onto the sea to continue our journey. This time it was different. I not only heard the sounds the bird was making but it seemed that it was communicating with each one of us. It knew about our adventures and witnessed what we had learned. As Brendan and the bird conversed it was as if our

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<sup>14</sup> Severin (1978, 143)

experiences were being replayed in our memories and I, for one, began to make sense of it all. I felt affirmed and even the struggles and hardship of the journey seemed worthwhile. It was now time for us to move on and the white bird would be our guide: "You must prepare now for the final part of the voyage," the bird seemed to be saying, "This time I will come with you, for you will not find your way to the Land of Promise without me."<sup>15</sup>

Shortly after leaving the island a dense mist settled over the water so thick that we could barely see one another on the boat. Droplets of water clung like dew to the fibres of our woolen hats and to our beards<sup>16</sup>. We were told that this mist perpetually encircled the land we had been seeking. It felt heavy like a warm blanket that enveloped us day after day. There was little conversation between us as we paddled our way across the placid water, each of us deep in thought. My mind wandered back to the beginning of our adventure several years before and what I had learned on the way. Then, in a way that can only happen in imagination, my thoughts would leap towards what we would shortly discover, only a moment later to return to the present to witness an oar as it dropped into the water to begin its passage beneath the surface.

Suddenly, after 40 days, the mist cleared and we were bathed in a great light. We were close to land and pulled ashore on a beach of white stones. In front of us were plants and trees full of the most delicious fruits, and the air was full of the smell of pomegranates. It was a strange and beautiful land. Although the time past quickly a year went by as day by day we discovered new treasures. In that time the sun did not set and we never lacked for food or water.

One day we came to a great river, too wide to cross in safety. Here we were met by a young man clad in a garment of radiant light who knew each of us by name. He explained that we had been delayed in our journey in order to learn the ways of the

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<sup>15</sup> Matthews (1998, 25)

<sup>16</sup> Severin (1978, 108)

ocean and the world. We could not cross the river now. This much had been shown to us so that we might know of its existence and tell everyone of its beauty. "This might be the lot of all if only they remember this place. For all have been here, and yet they have lost their way back to it,"<sup>17</sup> he told us.

Right now we were to gather fruit and the treasures of the island and return to the place from which we had come. He walked with us as we returned to our boat, talking to us "of the ways of the world and the ways of the spirit and how these might be brought together."<sup>18</sup> As we climbed into the boat he disappeared from view and we set sail for home.

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<sup>17</sup> Matthews (1998, 5)

<sup>18</sup> Matthews (1998, 5)



## Chapter Two

### Facing into the Wind

*Oh my soul, be prepared to meet Him  
who knows how to ask questions*

TS Eliot (1941)

*Inquiry ... means asking without expecting answers,  
just pondering the questions, carrying the wondering  
with you, just as everything else comes in and out  
of awareness ... Inquiry is not so much thinking about  
the answers, although the questioning will produce a  
lot of thoughts that look like answers. It really  
involves just listening to the thinking that your  
questioning evokes.*

Kabat-Zinn (1994)

In my experience of mentoring research students as they begin their inquiries it is the indeterminate methodology of Action Research, an expectation that we cannot know in advance how to manage the inquiry, that they find difficult. It is much easier for the researcher to hide behind an established methodology. But Action Research is not an excuse for sloppy research. For me, the rigour involved in Action Research is focussed on the moment of awareness and is found in an unwillingness to let go of questions too quickly, subjecting my purposes, assumptions and actions to critical reflection. The quality of this inquiry, I suggest, lies in part in its attention to detail.

## The Fodder of Experience

As my appreciation for Action Research grew in the early stages of this inquiry I began to collect an enormous amount of "data". My daily practice became the source of my inquiry and, unclear about what might be important, I tried to capture as much as I could in my journal, handwritten notes and audio recordings. It was as if I was driving a bulldozer, piling up notes on experience for later reflection. It was, I thought, all grist for the mill. It would take some time before I came to realise, in the words of Mary Catherine Bateson; "Wisdom comes not by accumulation of more and more experiences but through discerning pattern in the deeper mystery of what is already there" (Bateson 2000, 242).

The notion of experience has a long tradition in the history of ideas (Jay 2005). It is not my purpose to record the features of this history but to note a significant observation by Hans-Georg Gadamer (1989) that helps me distinguish between mere existence and experience. For an experience to be an experience, in Gadamer's thought, it must run counter to our expectations. Only through being surprised (Schon 1987) do we acquire new experiences, and therefore learn. This gives reason to those who suggest the importance of critical incidents in reflective practice (Fish & Coles 1998), of recognising that living life as inquiry (Marshall 1999) involves attention to our living contradictions (Whitehead 2006), disjunctures (Jarvis 1999), disorienting dilemmas (Mezirow 1991), arresting moments (Shotter & Katz 1996) or holy disruptions (Lonergan 1990). "What seems to be required," writes Mason, "is a disturbance or a resonance. Not a tidal wave, but a ripple sufficiently great to be distinguishable on the choppy surface which is my experience" (Mason 2002, 68).

So the raw 'data' of this inquiry is my lived experience - those moments that arrested my attention and gave me occasion to pause and connect with my circumstances. What I would now recognise as "being present". Or being absent. As some of the anecdotes I will recount in this thesis suggest, giving attention to my lived experience is like waking up, of glimpsing just briefly, a quality of

participation in the moment during a casual conversation or formal meeting. In these moments I sense an integrity in my practice - the release of all I have been becoming into the present moment, aligning word and action. But there is a paradox in being fully present in this way, of being fully in the moment and yet not holding on to it as it passes. As quickly as I find fulfilment I must let it go. There is a driving edge to the present as it tumbles into an unknown future. But there is a strong desire to hold on, to savour the moment rather than step into the 'now' and let it pass. I struggle to control the experience, the action, the moment - to give it purpose and direction. I notice, incidentally, a lingering essentialist view of the 'I' in these sentences. Who I am as I enter the present is who I have been becoming. Integrity is to be as fully present as possible; presence is to be there without holding on.

These occasions, when I am alert and engaged, bring into question the familiar ways in which I have understood the world and invite me to re-construct reality in new ways, either in-the-moment or after the event. They ask not just "what might I do or think differently" but "how might I be different" in this situation? They open to the possibility of a larger, more systemic consciousness. Attention to experience, in this way, is soul work. "Just as the mind digests ideas and produces intelligence," Moore says, "the soul feeds on life and digests it, creating wisdom and character out of the fodder of experience" (Moore 1992, 205).

This raises a crucial question about the way in which I make sense of experience and the process by which this influences my action. I would mislead my reader if I give the impression that this is primarily a rational or conscious process. The delight of waking up in-the-moment and responding to the occasion involves layers of understanding that I may not be fully conscious of. While acknowledging the contribution of reason and analysis in my choices I am also aware of the role of convention and personal history in my action.

John O'Donohue (2003, 140-141) tells the story of a farmer who visited an art gallery in the big city. The farmer lived on the shores of Loch Corrib, the second

largest lake in the West of Ireland. As the guide showed the farmer around the exhibition he pointed out the distinctive features of the paintings and their hidden symbolism. The farmer listened carefully but said nothing. When they were finished the farmer said to his guide: "Thank you very much. That was really interesting. You showed me in those paintings things I would never have noticed myself. You have a wonderful eye - it is a great gift and I envy you your gift. I don't have that gift myself but I do have Teannalach." The guide thanked him but was mystified as to what Teannalach was. Ah, the farmer explained, "I live besides the lake and you always hear the ripple of the waters and the sound of the wind on the surface; everyone hears that. However, on certain summer days when the lake is absolutely still and everything is silent, I can hear how the elements and the surface of the lake make a magic music together."

Some time later the guide was on holiday near Loch Corrib and, one evening in a village pub he found an opportunity to inquiry further about Teannalach. The person with whom he had fallen into conversation paused for a while and smiled. "You'll hear that word all right in these parts. But I've never seen it written down. And it is hard to say what it means. I suppose it means awareness, but in truth it is about seven layers deeper than awareness." Perhaps, O'Donohue suggests, the word is an abbreviation of *teanga na locha*, the tongue or the language of the lake.

Since stumbling into this storied account of Teannalach I try to listen for the language of the lake, imagining it as a deep murmuring that blends the cacophony of sounds at the surface into some kind of coherence. This is a very different language to the strident rhetoric of strategic thinking in the domains of management or military planning, for example, where intended outcomes determine present practice and serve as the primary assessment of behaviour. While such rhetoric might create a sense of collective purpose, it significantly curtails the possibilities of human action in the present and rapes the present for assumed benefits in the future. Bourdieu (1977, 1990) thinks of strategy in a



different way.<sup>19</sup> He writes about a “practical logic” that most of us, most of the time, take for granted - a bit like having a “feel for the game”, a learned repertoire of prior experience and situational knowledge. Intriguingly, he calls this kind of knowledge, ‘doxic experience’. *Doxa* originally referred, in Greek society, to common belief or popular opinion, from which we derive the modern terms of orthodoxy and heterodoxy. In later use, however, it was given a religious meaning, translating the Hebrew concept of “glory”. I find this combination of everyday collective intuition and transcendent awareness a helpful insight into practical knowledge, since it recognises the multiple layers of meaning in experience and goes beyond the traditional objective-subjective divide.

While espousing a visionary approach to organisational development, the focus of much strategic planning on outcomes, resource assessment and rational analysis suppresses or denies the transcendent source of such vision. For Bourdieu, however, strategising becomes:

“an interplay of factors learnt and being learnt, through which an actor knows - without knowing in a rational, calculating way - the right thing to do. The cultural “givenness” of a situation, an individual's competency, resource constraints, personal idiosyncrasies, unintended consequences, and personal and group history, all come together in strategising.” (Burkett 2009).

This means that, for Bourdieu, practical knowledge, or ‘doxic’ experience has a strong improvisational character, and in an echo of Polanyi he writes, “It is because subjects do not, strictly speaking, know what they are doing that what they do has more meaning than they know.” (1977, 79). Practice is therefore an art - it is developed through practice. This is confirmed by Schon (1983), has been developed as an approach to the critical appreciation of practice (Fish and Coles 1998), and has come to serve as a core perspective on my own professional practice.

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<sup>19</sup>I am grateful to Chris Burkett for introducing me to Bourdieu’s ideas (Burkett at <http://www.theosoc.com/chminissues.html> (viewed 15 August 2009).

While this recognises the emergent nature of practical knowledge it also brings to prominence the role of memory in the hermeneutic of experience. In composing a learning narrative I am offering a "second reading of experience" which can be considered "truer than the first because it adds to experience itself consciousness of it." (Gusdorf in Freeman 2006, 131). This is particularly evident in the way in which unfinished business in our personal history, what Postle refers to as omitted, distorted or distressed learning (Postle 1993, 33), is incorporated in present experience.

A few weeks ago I was asked to play the music for a wedding. I can't remember when I last played the organ or piano in public and I only occasionally take the time to play it in the privacy of our living room. But I accepted the challenge. Some of the music was straightforward and a little practice on Purcell's Trumpet Voluntary and Mendelssohn's Wedding March sufficed, but I had some difficulty picking something appropriate to play while the couple and witnesses were signing the register. I realised the congregation would have nothing else to do except stare at the stained glass windows and listen to my 'performance.'

Because I am so out of practice nothing seemed to work. In rehearsal I played through an anthology of classical music but my fingers got tangled and the rhythms just wouldn't flow. Until, that is, I picked up a copy of Debussy's *Clair de Lune*. It had been ages since I had played the piece but almost immediately the music began to flow from my fingers. It wasn't something I would have been able to sight read. Written in D flat major (five flats) and modulating into E major (four sharps) it isn't a simple piece to play. I noticed that I had written the date I purchased the music on the cover - the year I turned 15. A few years later it had been put away and had remained untouched for more than 40 years.

But almost a half century later my fingers knew what to do with the notes and, although they are not as agile as they were in my teens I was able to play the music with relative ease. I was amazed at how easily I found the notes, the musical score translating itself into beautiful sound. At several points I had handwritten the

fingering on the music and I was surprised to notice that my fingers seems to naturally follow the pattern I had practised years ago. It was an expression of a deeply embodied knowledge, shaped in early practice, and recovered in memory. Time, it seems, does not eradicate embodied knowing.

But it was not perfect - my lack of practice over the years meant that there were technical errors and I found myself pausing occasionally as if there was a temporary memory loss. As I settled into some note bashing - working over sections to be sure I had the right notes - I noticed something that surprised me. My performance deteriorated as my technical accuracy improved. I was bringing the performance into the present and, in the process, losing touch with the emotional quality of my early performance. I was interrupting the expression of memory to perfect my performance in the present. My embodied memory had no immediate connection to the present moment and I discovered that I had to transform it, seeking expression that fit my present emotional interpretation and the situation in which it would be performed. This was memory, faithful to the past and my early practice but not just re-run for the occasion. It had to be expressed in the present, not just revised by further thought but transformed by who I had become and the situation in which it would be performed.

This reminds me that the process of incorporating prior experience in the present can be used deliberately. In discussing what he calls 'reflection-through-action' Mason suggests:

"choosing to act in slightly novel ways (using a different hand, standing or sitting differently, not using certain words) in order to heighten sensitivity to notice while engaging in practice. For example, it is said that the brilliant and accomplished pianist Artur Rubinstein would deliberately choose, for a particular concert, not to use a particular finger, in order to keep himself awake and sensitised to his playing." (Mason 2002, 15)

## Inquiry in Action

My understanding and practice of action research has developed over the length of this inquiry and I cannot, therefore, outline in simple terms a methodology in the way this is understood in conventional academic research. My inquiries do not fit into the framework of a research discipline (such as sociology or psychology) and its conventional methodologies. Readers hopeful of a tidy description of the way I have gone about my research and a tightly argued justification for its appropriateness to the claims I make about “knowing” will therefore be disappointed. This does not, however, imply lack of attention to rigour and quality. I hope to show how I make sense of experience and how I link this with ideas from the wider field of scholarship, giving particular attention to the choices available at each stage of the inquiry. Action research is full of choices and what I can aspire to is evidence of quality in my awareness of the choices and the manner in which I make these accessible to wider scrutiny.

This is inquiry, not to prove something but to improve it, drawing on a wide repertoire of tools and skills that will be discussed in the remaining sections of this chapter. What follows, therefore, is not a conventional section on methodology but an introduction to ways I have inquired into my professional practice in order to open up my approach to further reflection. I begin with an incident from my practice as a learning facilitator. At the beginning of 2007 I took over responsibility for coordinating the Research Induction School (RIS) for prospective PhD students. This six week programme had been established to help incoming students develop their research proposal and identify their supervision team. In previous years it had comprised a series of lectures and workshops from different members of faculty on their areas of expertise. Little attention, it seemed to me, had been given to the pedagogy. As one of several innovations I introduced to the programme two weeks into the process I set the group (a woman from Zambia and three men from Bulgaria, India and Belarus) a formative assignment to present a critical response to a public lecture given by an Oxford Don on the subject of witchcraft in Africa.

They chose to dramatise what, for them, was a central concern they identified in listening to the lecture. The lecturer had set himself up as an expert in the field (and he was clearly very knowledgeable) but the students had observed that he had researched the topic as an outsider. In their response, presented a few days later to a small audience of other researchers and faculty, the Zambian danced a traditional village dance (to the accompaniment of African drum music) while the other three sat around a table, their backs to the dance, role playing an anthropologist, a church leader and a Scotland Yard detective discussing its meaning (the lecturer had referred to the case of ritual killing of children in the UK a few years ago). The discussion that followed their presentation lasted for more than forty five minutes.

That afternoon I met with the students to talk about their experience of the lecture, what they felt they had learned from their attempt to present a critical response, and the feedback they received from their audience. I had intended this to be the end of the assignment but as they shared their comments I sensed that there was more to be learned and, spontaneously, I suggested that they each write up a brief commentary on what they had gained from the experience - deliberately choosing another form of presentation (writing) for the exercise. This extension of the assignment had not been planned and arose in-the-moment as I interacted with the group. I describe this as a sense "that there was more to be learned..." I want to be careful not to reduce this to a rational decision. Different impressions may have contributed to the sense I made of the moment - the creativity they had exhibited in the performance and the energy that was now present in their discussion. It felt right to go with the flow and the suggestion was welcomed by the group.

I was excited as I read over their reflections a few days later. There were very positive comments on how the group had worked together. One wrote, "we were able to achieve something greater as a group than we could have achieved independently. In the future, I need to remember to utilize this kind of collaborative work." There was an honesty about the process, "I found myself

holding back critique,” another wrote, “because of his academic stature and expertise in the field. I had critical thoughts, but I did not manifest them, speak them, or write them down.”

They had noticed different kinds and qualities of learning in the different phases of the assignment - the struggle to understand and follow the formal lecture, or what one feared was a trivialisation of the material when critiqued in a skit. One was “struck by what our audience did not see in our presentation” and another observed that in the discussion with faculty following the presentation, “the faculty identified several key observations that I and the group failed to make.” The Indian had accepted the African dance as a cultural expression of thanksgiving but commented in his written piece, “... but if I look from the other angle as an outsider especially as one who is unfamiliar with the langue (sic) and tradition her dance looks eccentric or demon possessed,” confirming experientially, what had been said in the lecture about European ways of thinking about African cultural practices.

And perhaps most perceptively the African, who was most familiar with the issues, noticed that in their presentation, they were in danger of exhibiting a view of the issue that had been critiqued in the lecture - the tendency for European academics (and Scotland Yard detectives) to lump (the term used by the lecturer) African religious practices and witchcraft together.

As I read over each of the accounts, it occurred to me that there would be a further benefit to convening a second session to discuss what the participants had written. This in itself proved a valuable learning activity. It was the first time the group talked with each other about the way they had worked together, raising important questions about their collaboration and the way leadership had emerged amongst them. The members of the group had only met each other two weeks before, yet, despite coming from very different cultures and educational backgrounds they were able to work together to offer a perceptive and creative critique of the

scholarship of a respected academic. And I had learned a lot about my own practice as a learning facilitator.

I share this incident in order to open up my inquiry practice to scrutiny. As a small scale cycle of inquiry it offers an example of moments of awareness and a quality of presence at different stages of the experience which influenced, in consequence, the choices that emerged. Over the period of practice included in this research I have made use of several approaches to inquiry. Initially I was drawn to Action Research through my experience with reflective practice and located my research within the tradition first articulated by Donald Schon (1983). "The unique and uncertain situation comes to be understood through the attempt to change it," he says, "and changed through the attempt to understand it." (Schon 1983). While aspiring to knowing and reflecting 'in' action I often resort to reflection-on-action in order to probe the influences on my practice further. In different ways I seek to "re-frame" (in the sense described by Schon) a situation or incident in order to disclose its meaning. With a little practice I now see these different techniques as alternative ways of participating in the appreciative system described by Schon (1983) - probing the situation and carefully analysing its "backtalk." Although I continue to experiment, several approaches in particular have entered my quotidian practice.

I start with my action in the world. Action reveals being - I am what I do. It is, according to Michael Novak (1971) "our most reliable mode of philosophizing. In action we declare our cosmology, our politics, our convictions, our identity" (ibid, p46). So much of my action, however, is unconsciously driven. The first discipline, therefore, is to cultivate a deeper awareness of my actions through listening and attentional skills - what Mason (2002) calls "the discipline of noticing." It involves an immersion in the experience, paying attention emotionally and imaginatively, acting out of this awareness and being changed by it. In the incident recorded above I was pleased and excited by the imaginative way in which the group chose to present their critique and this confirmed my belief in the ability of students, when provided with what Torbert calls "liberating structures" (Torbert 1991) to

respond creatively. This contributed to my 'sense' that there was more to learn from the experience. Scharmer says, "the way we pay attention to a situation, individually and collectively, determines the path the system takes and how it emerges" (Scharmer 2007).

In the early days of my introduction to Action Research I rather studiously (and clumsily) made use of a number of different tools. I experimented with double and triple loop learning (Torbert 2004) and multi-column analysis (Senge et al 1994), and became more intentional in my use of a learning journal (Ghaye and Lillyman 1997, Moon 1999). I practised the inner and outer arcs of attention (Marshall 2001), finding the discipline of "noticing myself perceiving, making meaning, framing issues, choosing how to speak out, and so on," (Marshall 1999) challenging. As I probed the reality in my daily practice I became more aware of the mental models, beliefs and assumptions that influence my sense making. Knowing-in-action (Schon 1983) is a complex activity involving perceiving, thinking, interacting and doing, in real time. I began to notice gaps between my espoused values and values in use (Argyris 1999). In describing a teaching incident in March 2004, for example, I referred to Heidegger's words, "Teaching is more difficult than learning because what teaching calls for is this: to let learn." (Heidegger in Jarvis 1999, 13). I wrote:

"This notion is a core element of my espoused theory. I see myself as a learning facilitator, or what Smyth calls a 'collaborative learner.' (Smyth 1991). But this leads me to the struggle I find in balancing inquiry (listening and asking clarifying questions) and advocacy (offering interpretations and explanations, or making suggestions). A 'let learn' approach requires action by the student and I sometimes lose patience and am tempted to instruct - "let me spell that out for you ..." I realise that this is not just a question of facilitation skills. My own dispositions play a role. Do I listen carefully enough? How interested am I in their hesitant articulations?"



The next chapter of this thesis offers further discussion of my Action Inquiry practice. It forms an essential foundation to my emerging understanding of professional practice.

## **Relational Inquiry**

My inquiry does not occur in a social vacuum. In most of my professional activity I am working with others and this interaction has a crucial influence on my sense making and action. There is, of course, a practical difficulty of turning the numerous conversations, meetings and seminars that fill my day into collaborative inquiries, yet by taking an attitude of inquiry myself and attempting to create a relational space there can be a qualitative shift in understanding. Bruner talks of "distributed intelligence", the idea that community involves more than "a set of conventions of praxis" but can be "a way of exercising intelligence" (Bruner 1996, 154).

In facilitating the learning experience that emerged from the lecture on African witchcraft described above there are indications of collective intelligence at work. The initial task presented to the students simply stated:

"You are expected to work together on the seminar this week. The assignment is to present a critical response to the Tuesday lecture, to be given on April 10th. Work together in planning the presentation and ensure that each of you is involved in the planning and presentation. Think creatively about the format - you are at liberty to include any communication form you feel would be appropriate, possibly offering a variety of presentations to convey your ideas." (April 2007)

Early in the planning of the presentation one individual provided leadership - an interesting role since he had told the others that he had found it difficult to follow the lecture because he had not been able to hear everything from where he was

sitting. Other members of the group compensated for this and enabled him to shape a consensus from the ideas that were proposed. The dramatic presentation served as a collective expression of their reaction to the lecture while respecting their individual perspectives. A key element of the skit arose from the African's understanding of the dance as an expression of Christian thanksgiving - an insight that was missed by those who were watching. The Indian, with a background in television, worked on the staging and other technical aspects of the presentation.

As I map the learning process in this example I can identify both individual and collective sense-making:

Individual	Collective
My action, as learning facilitator, to set up the activity	
Individual participation in the lecture	
	Collective sense-making and choices in preparing the presentation
	Improvisational drama providing occasions of simultaneous leadership and individual expression
	Collective sense making with the audience
	Agreement to continue the inquiry through individual writing
Individual sense making in writing	
	Collective sense-making in the group

But while there is evidence of collaboration in the incident recorded above I also want to acknowledge that this could have been strengthened further. Although I was working in a group I realise that I have given a personal account of the experience - at this stage in my inquiries I was focused on my own sense-making

and choices. A more relational awareness only emerged later in my approach to inquiry. But there is a feature of the incident that points the way. As I/we faced the fodder of experience, there was something more than the discipline of noticing involved in shaping my/our understanding and action. We were fully immersed in the process. The learning process was enriched by the energy and commitment we all brought to the occasion. Knowing in this way is not just about awareness, but attitude - there was an attraction that both facilitated and deepened the learning experience.

I will explore the epistemological grounding of this approach to inquiry in a later chapter of this thesis so will only offer a brief introduction now. Living in a relational world I reject the notion that knowledge is a private possession. Martin Buber ([1937] 1970) tackled the subject-object dichotomy by recognising that the Other is also subject and proposing a subject-subject relationship he called "I-Thou" in contrast to the "I-It" of subject-object. For an I-Thou relationship to emerge I must let the Other be a subject and affirm our shared involvement in sense making.

This, it seems to me, does not require formal agreement or even conscious commitment. I am learning, in my practice, to adopt a posture of inquiry in my daily encounters with others. Margaret Wheatley (2002) hints at some of the qualities that might characterise this relational posture - curiosity, courtesy and charity. As my inquiries around this practice have developed I have added to this list the quality of reverence - a capacity to be in awe of the Other - and the influence this has on my sense making. While I cannot establish intentional collaborative inquiry in every meeting or conversation, I am convinced that by taking an attitude of inquiry myself, and attempting to create a reverential relational space, my agentic "self" is replaced by a collective will that can lead to positive change in my/our practice. Reverence, it seems to me, has all but disappeared in our social life, pushed aside by more practical values like justice and respect. The cultivation of reverence for whatever lies beyond my control has become an important feature of this research journey.

A relational posture heightens awareness of issues of difference and power. As I open myself to the Other I find a stranger - a work colleague, a student, a friend, even my wife - and look across the distance that separates us in an attempt to receive what is offered. As Reason says, "as soon as we touch upon the question of participation we have to entertain and *work with* issues of power, oppression, gender ..." (Reason 1994, 2). I am conscious, for example, of my role in initiating the learning activity and the cultural expectations of the participants of their "teacher." These concerns will be discussed in more detail later in the thesis.

In exploring the relationship between ontology and epistemology I have been tempted to delimit ontology with the adjective 'relational'. This reflects my belief that the cosmos is relational and every part of it connected to other parts and to the whole. To present my fundamental view of the world in terms of a 'relational ontology' may be a slightly clumsy way of highlighting a basic characteristic of the world that now shapes my practice and offers a standard of judgement against which I wish my claims to knowing to be assessed. The notion of myself as a participant in that which I seek to know has become central to my inquiry. "Discovery is facilitated by becoming part of the system." (Keller [1985] in Bradbury & Lichtenstein 2000, 553).

Incidentally the story I recounted above also illustrates a process of social construction. The little experience I have of an action orientation to knowledge creation has made me realise how slippery reality is. Even constructivists imply something more fixed or permanent than I sense it is. Having given an account of social reality many are quite content to live in the house they have constructed. Yet, for me, just as I think I have located something, it slips out of my grasp - whether the reality is personal or social.

A key aspect of my understanding of action research is therefore its emergent character. I seek, in my inquiry, to stay alert to opportunities for deeper learning. What was particularly rewarding, for me, in the incident I have described, was the way in which the participants came to see how each cycle of presentation (in their

drama, our discussions, or their writing) opened up further insights into our understanding of the topic. Our knowing would have been impoverished if we had stopped the process sooner.

## **Systemic Inquiry**

As I now write about this experience I am aware of a blind spot in my thinking about the student's seminar presentation. At the time I was deeply immersed in the process and only conscious of the immediate circumstances. I gave little thought to the wider context of faculty and institution. Several of the faculty had attended the improvisational drama and contributed to the subsequent discussion and I missed an opportunity to involve them more fully in the sense making process, particularly since I had hoped to develop more inclusive and creative learning experiences in future.

In my rather naive, optimistic outlook on life I underestimated the challenge. "To ask faculty to change a curriculum is like asking someone to move a graveyard," Catherine Bateson observes (Bateson 1989, 97). I came into academic life quite late in my career and it took me some time to learn its ways. Resistance to change is characteristic of many fields of professional life but, in my experience, it finds particular expression in higher education in territorial control and elaborate tactics to avoid more work. This is illustrated in several incidents that will be recorded later in the thesis in which I attempted a more collaborative approach to course development. In a way only life can explain, however, my emerging practice of thinking and acting systemically came as the project I had been involved in began to collapse and the opportunity to influence its future development slipped through my fingers.

Action Research involves a process of micro-political interventions in practice in order to change it. I make conscious decisions about where and when to act, to 'persist' or 'desist,' to use Judi Marshall's (1999) terms. I make choices in selecting

and crafting the stories I tell. The quality of my inquiry is, in part, to be judged by the quality of attention I bring to these choices. Am I aware of the habits, customs and systemic coercion that shape and constrain my decisions? How do I navigate the complex relationships and tensions between the subjective and intersubjective lifeworld, and the systems world in which my practice is located (Habermas 1987)? Does my inquiry give sufficient attention to the “regimes of truth” (Foucault 1977) that shape my context and impose their normalising processes on my (and our) practice?

Thinking systemically involves an awareness of what is not in the room or explicit in the conversation. It is to realise that, despite appearances, individuals are “un-divided from the whole” (the original meaning of the word ‘individual’ (Selby 2002, 83)), and situations are episodes in a larger flow of activity. Again, experience became the fodder for my understanding, exposing the wider influences on my action. If this thesis had been written a year earlier it would have been a victory narrative. The Post-graduate Programme in Professional Practice had been launched with university validation and a very positive response from the market - 20 students had enrolled in the PhD programme in the first six months. Yet, out of sight and sound, the forces that would erupt with the destructive energy of an earthquake were shifting.

Thinking and acting systemically confronts the practitioner with the limitations in attentional skill and contextual understanding. In simple terms the experience that forms the central narrative of this stage in my inquiry involved three circles of systemic influence - the conservative culture of higher education in the UK and, in particular, its attitudes to professional learning; the policies and structures of validation and collaborative relationships in the partner university; and complex cultural and economic influences in the leadership of the Centre that was host to the project. Seismic shifts in all three contexts formed a background to what happened in the middle of 2008 as their influence seeped through the layers into everyday relationships.

Twelve days after receiving notice that the university intended to withdrawal from the partnership we had established, for example, I observed in my journal that the professional relationships amongst senior staff at the Centre had become jittery. I was reprimanded for informing one of our partners of the decision, and a couple of days later the clashes became more pronounced. Four of us were meeting to discuss the next steps. The plan being proposed was to move the students affected by the closure onto the existing well established PhD programme, offered by the Centre and validated by a different university. I was hoping, at that stage, to be able to find another university willing to validate the project. The mood of the meeting, however, was to consolidate under one PhD programme even though the structure and regulatory framework of the traditional programme was unsuitable for Practitioner Researchers. My journal records some of my feelings:

"I began to feel distinctly uncomfortable. We were talking about the institution and the programme. I was trying to hold a space for a way of doing research that had been embedded in the programme and that now floated like a spirit released from its body. It was this - not the programme structure - that had captured the imagination of the market. I was being told, "but at the institutional level it must now fit with the existing regulations and committee structure. You must work with the system." "But hopefully," I responded, "the system can be modified." "We can't have students in the same programme on different paths," I was told by the chair, and the regulations of the existing programme could not be changed.

I was being isolated in the discussion and it was getting personal. Realising that there was no room for manoeuvre I asked, "can we change the subject?" I was knocked back by the response, "You are not in the chair," he replied, "I'm in the chair." I noticed that for the past few minutes, the other two participants had been silent so I said, "I'd like to know what the others think?" The retort from the chair was swift and brutal, "Don't try to use other people in the meeting to bolster your argument."

I should inform the reader that until the withdrawal of the university partnership the person in the chair had been my strongest ally in the institution. He was the only academic who fully engaged with the project's development and he had given unequivocal support to its unique features. It was difficult to now find him taking such a strong defensive position on behalf of the institution. There was no doubt - the system was in the room and I had chosen to question it.

Relationships with the chair would improve over the months following this incident but it became clear that I needed more than tactical changes to my relational inquiry to respond to the situation. Perhaps what Prigogine (1989) calls 'disequilibrium' is necessary for systemic awareness. He writes;

"In equilibrium each molecule can only see its immediate neighbours. Out of equilibrium the system can see the totality of the system. One could almost say that matter in equilibrium is blind, and out of equilibrium starts to see."  
(Prigogine in Selby 2002, 85).

Nevertheless, making sense of this period of my inquiry has been difficult, not just because of the personal consequences (the collapse of a project I had committed several years of my life to, and the loss of work) but also because, in the confusion of the moment, rational explanations were inadequate. It took time to begin to see the disruptions as liminal moments, exposing deeper levels of knowing both of myself and my circumstances. The disruptions raised questions I could not articulate, yet which fueled my inquiry. Perhaps, to follow O'Reilley, they were like Buddhist 'koans' pointing to "a ground of knowing deeper than the rattle of cognitive thought." (O'Reilley 1998, 38). In the disequilibrium I began to glimpse the mystery of the whole and found myself drawn angrily and tearfully into its embrace.

This parallels, in the way I now think about it, the emerging levels of consciousness (Wilber 1990, 2005), stages of personhood (Heron 1992) or post-conventional action-logics elaborated by Cook-Greuter (2002) and popularised by Torbert



(2004). Professional development, as I have come to experience and understand it, includes an aspirational dimension. I aspire to what Torbert calls the 'super-vision' of living the four territories of experience in both first, second and third person in real time. (Torbert 2004, 18). Super-vision that can shape systemic action is not, at least in my experience, an endowment or permanent achievement, but occurs as epiphanies that come and go, like presence - occasions when I perceive the whole as a gift. It is, perhaps, to glimpse what David Selby calls "the signature of the whole" (Selby 2002, 77).

In one sense, therefore, the thesis is an account of the tactics I use as I confront the strategies set by the systems in which I work (de Certeau [1984] 2002). At times they are aligned but at others divergent. What self-deception! Beguiled by opportunities in which I thought I had the authority to design the system myself, in the background was the colonising pull of larger systems. No wonder I did not recognise or name them correctly. Habermas (1987) describes the colonisation of our everyday, communal lifeworlds by administrative systems driven by the demands of policy or economics. Perhaps most insidious in an academic environment have been the discourses that set out the pathways for intellectual development, gifting to students methodologies that are self-validating within the discourse, making their own inquiry so much easier. Both the systems and I emerged from this period of our shared history changed in subtle and obvious ways. At times the journey was a pleasure. At others the storms seemed life-threatening and both the systems and I emerged damaged in some way.

## **Writing as Inquiry**

These approaches to inquiry may constitute the features of my quotidian practice but there is another level of knowing that shapes this thesis. As I write I move from being to presenting, giving permanence to a particular account of momentary experience, wrestling with the ambiguity of the words that will lie on the page, conscious of how the reader will find connotations behind what I intend as

denotation and spin a metaphor or story in unexpected ways. The fodder of experience currently lies reported in my journal, email archive, audio recordings of student seminars and business meetings, and various other detritus that I have collected through the past few years. But all that is past, and as Antonio says to Sebastian in *The Tempest*, "what's past is prologue."<sup>20</sup> My inquiry is now in exploring the shift from experience to presentation and the different kind of knowing this evokes. As I craft a narrative from the numerous incidents of the past five years, I am making a selection of anecdotes and developing the plot in ways that constitute a theoretical framing (Czarniawski 2004, Bruner 1990) on the passage of time. This is where I now name reality.

And that is not easy. Mary Catherine Bateson (1989, 2004) suggests the metaphor of composing as a way of capturing the artistic and choiceful way in which we talk or write about our lives. There are many versions of this period of my life I could tell, emphasising its continuities or discontinuities, successes or disappointments. Its not that one account is true and another is not. They may serve different purposes or address different readers. My purpose, in this thesis, is to offer an account of my professional experience that explores the changes, one might even call them transformations, in my practice that have occurred as I have become more consciously aware of being present in and for the moment.

I must avoid the impression of a carefully crafted, perfectly lived, experience. As already noted, there have been many unexpected twists and turns, moments of emotional confusion and pain as well as elation and contentment. This is a representation of life as it has been lived in all its uncertainty and confusion as it appears now through the eyes of the present. Bruner (1990) captures this in his observation of the curious nature of autobiography that "is an account given by a narrator in the here and now about a protagonist bearing his name who existed in the there and then, the story terminating in the present when the protagonist fuses with the narrator" (1990, 121).

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<sup>20</sup> The Tempest Act 2, scene 1

Writing is a primal form of presentation - a choiceful act of moving from experiential to presentational knowing (Heron 1992). My background in journalism would encourage a descriptive style of writing, providing just enough information for the reader to enter the experience themselves. My academic study of communication convinces me of the complexity of this process. Early models of the communication process were based on information theory and couched in terms of stimulus-response. Messages could be coded and successfully decoded on reception. But as the empirical evidence mounted, context and culture entered the frame, leading to a recognition that meanings are created by the receiver and the research focus turned to the structural analysis of the way signs work in culture, resorting, in many cases, to the analytical power of semiotics. I used to enjoy asking the question "When does a message acquire meaning?" in a communications seminar and listening to the answers.

But after a couple of years asking students to present a semiotic analysis of the media coverage of the Oscars, or The World Cup, I began to notice the way in which this approach objectivised the message. It was possible, figuratively, to put the media event on the laboratory bench and dissect it down to its semiotic molecules. But having separated it into its diachronic and synchronic parts what did we know? Perhaps how it had been constructed and, for some, even ideas on how they might construct their own media messages - the choice of colour, frame, and camera angle offering paradigmatic choices for the editor or producer. In the words of Walker Percy (1983) it was a form of self-transcendence through technical analysis, but; "The pleasure of such transcendence derives not from the recovery of self but from the loss of self. Scientific and artistic transcendence is a partial recovery of Eden, the semiotic Eden, when the self explored the world through signs before falling into self-consciousness." (Percy 1983, 123)

Percy (1983) understood that objects and signs (*signifieds* and *signifiers* in de Saussure's<sup>21</sup> terminology) are not sufficient in the creation of meaning. Rather

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<sup>21</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) is considered the father of modern linguistics. His work laid the foundation for a science that studies the role of signs in social

than recovering the innocence of Eden where signs corresponded to that which they represented, the link between symbols and reality is arbitrary. Percy's contribution to communication was to recognise that, despite its arbitrary character, the significance of the word lies in the human agent that speaks it. The word brings things 'out-there' into meaningful relationship with the speaker and, in its utterance, offers that word to others in the co-creation of meaning. So to speak or write is to create a world in which I exist and seek mutuality.

Naming reality in this way is in contrast to the cacophony of words that roam free of their source, words that no-one owns, serving instrumental ends and organised by technical means. These are what Ellul calls anonymous words; "the word may be prostituted ... the anonymous word has no name, and this is not really a word. No one has spoken it ... It does not commit anyone to anything" (Ellul 1985, 158). Open to technical manipulation the anonymous word can serve any purpose.

Action Research and in particular, first person inquiry, is sometimes criticised as self-indulgent and solipsistic. My initial rebuttal to such criticisms from colleagues was to point to the purpose of such inquiry. Action Research is not solipsistic if it seeks practical wisdom that leads to social transformation. My answer now also includes this search for an authentic voice, for a language that connects me to reality. Ellul points out, "In the Bible the word is an integral part of the person. It is true if the person is true" (Ellul 1985, 158). Such committed speech or writing is an invitation to relationship - with reality and with others. So writing as inquiry, for me, recognises the unique quality of knowing that emerges as words give expression to experience and, in the process, disclose something of myself towards an other (in this case my reader), inviting them into a shared inquiry.

Perhaps a small example will help. In the account that follows I bring to words the experience of a small group community planning meeting, and attempt to illustrate

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life and provided a system for analysing language and, subsequently other communication forms.

how the seemingly small and personal micro-practices of my work are suffused with social and political implications.

We had decided to meet in an informal setting and gathered in our living room over coffee. As the meeting progressed I became aware that I was addressing my comments to Robert<sup>22</sup>, the committee chair, who was sitting directly in front of me on the opposite side of the coffee table. Because of the position of their chairs, Carol (Robert's wife), to my left and Paul, to my right, rarely received eye contact from either Robert or myself. I realised that Paul was slouching in his chair and making very few contributions. He had become quite passive and I was concerned that he had withdrawn from the discussion.

As the meeting progressed I decided to address the issue and commented on what I had noticed. Paul immediately agreed with my analysis. I therefore offered to swap seats with him in order (from my point of view) to bring him into the conversation. We continued the business of the meeting and, very soon, he began to contribute in quite an animated way. I don't think it was just because his presence had been acknowledged - his position had changed in relation to the chair of the meeting and this gave him more confidence. I also noticed that I began to slouch and my contribution became less dominant. Re-arranging the seating had re-balanced the power in the room.

This proved to be important to an issue that came up later in the meeting, a discussion on whether to invite another person to join the planning group. Carol proposed her name but in a slightly uncomfortable way since the candidate was her daughter. I found myself "to one side" listening as the conversation wove its way through the merits of her involvement. Paul, in his new chair, offered his views quite clearly and in favour of the appointment.

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<sup>22</sup> To preserve anonymity and yet enable the reader to follow the action I have used pseudonyms in telling this story.

After some time Robert, the project leader, turned to me to say that they had not heard my view.

This was difficult. I had felt uncomfortable when the name first came into the conversation and had been trying to decide on my response. I took the plunge and referenced the circumstances that had led to Carol's own involvement in the project several years earlier when a number of people had objected to the undemocratic way in which, as Robert's wife, she had been appointed to the planning group. Carol said that the reactions we had received to that decision did concern her now.

After the meeting I reflected on what the rearrangement of the seating had allowed us to do, how it may not have been possible for me to raise the sensitive issues had I been in the "power" chair I had relinquished to Paul, or if I had, how it could have created a far more difficult atmosphere. Instead my contribution was a "voice from the side" and this may have made it easier for us to explore how, and not just whether, Carol's daughter might be involved.

So what has been happening as I have given this incident written form? A number of things are going on, influencing my choices as I write. In offering this small window into my quotidian practice I am writing myself towards understanding. In the minutiae of word choice I am seeking a form that brings meaning to the experience, a process that is aided by the flexibility of a word processor. Am I content, for example, with the meanings conveyed by my decision to describe Paul's posture as "slouching" and his participation as "passive" for example? Or in another case, I initially described my recollection of Carol's introduction to the group as a "criticism" and wrote that "I was pleased" by the reaction of Robert and Carol to my comment. As the words formed on the page, however, I became uncomfortable with the slight smugness they conveyed. This is not just about getting it right, as if words could ever be that precise. But, like a musical phrase that, once it has begun, finds its own direction, sentences tilt towards their resolution and I want to leave open enough space for a response.

Writing gives access to the experience and the sense making that was going on. I sometimes think of words like trowels digging in the soil of experience to uncover its treasures. As I save the draft the story is fixed, becoming a container of meaning I can offer to my reader, inviting you to connect and interact with me. Are my words trustworthy? Do they draw you into a relationship with what is going on and have I avoided closure, leaving sufficient space for further inquiry? And most importantly, am I present in the writing? The story identifies me as a part of the problem, my dominant position and self-confidence combining to exclude Paul from the discussions. Each aspect of the situation - the arrangement of the chairs, my decision to voice concern over the power dynamics of the situation and choice to move "to one side", and then to bring to speech an incident from the past that was in danger of silently shaping our future - involved choices about how I worked with the power that was distributed in the room and how I now choose to represent it. It also illustrates the ethical nature of practice. Power exists in every situation and can be used (or mis-used) for the common good. So, while it is necessary to describe the ethics of my inquiry as I have done in the Introduction, it is also essential to evidence an ethic of everyday practice rooted in the values I espouse, establishing a further quality by which this thesis may be judged.

## **Narrative Inquiry**

I chose to offer the incident recorded above as a story, what may be called an anecdote, an account of a fragment of experience chosen to expose a fractal of my social practice. This introduces a further dimension to my inquiry. As described earlier, this thesis is a learning narrative, or narrative inquiry. As such, it is a "multi-layered and many stranded" (Clandinin & Connelly 2000) form of inquiry, reflecting inward and outward, backward and forward on my professional practice. While not following a strictly chronological form, the thesis gives careful attention to unfolding events and their sequence. At the same time there is something incomplete about these stories. The reader will experience a sense of being "in the midst" of processes that extend into the past and reach towards the future.

Interventions in my context of practice can be seen as shaping the narrative plot, designed to influence the story of the institution and shape the experience of my students. Even this statement may imply more than is intended, as if I knew what I was doing and had control of the consequences. Many of the stories told in this thesis bear resemblance to what Mary Catherine Bateson calls "hit and miss epiphanies" (Bateson 1994, 115), incidents that only now, in their telling, have become part of the learning experience.

Narrative nevertheless serves my purpose mimetically, providing a way of representing my practice, as well as functioning as a tool of inquiry. As experience flows onto the page it finds form in anecdote and commentary laced together into a larger narrative structure. The mimetic step, of course, is huge. Representation is a misleading term. As Richard Rorty (1980) makes clear, there is no one to one correspondence between words and the worlds they purport to represent. The production of a text seeking to represent reality is another reality, related to its source by social convention and shared practice. And, if experience cannot speak for itself, if it can only be accessed through words or other forms of presentation, there may be competing accounts of the experience, raising questions about how these conventions arise, and the purposes behind particular forms of presentation. It is therefore important to explore, briefly, how narrative serves mimetically in this thesis.

A life is mostly remembered in bursts of short stories  
Beautifully interwoven with people, places and events  
A word, a picture, a smell can set it all in motion  
And you can close your eyes and see it clearly  
As if it happened only yesterday (Trammel in Moore, 2008)

There is an important inquiry around the choice of incidents and the way in which they are weaved into the narrative. Czarniawska reminds us that Aristotle first differentiated between a simple story (in the sense in which I am using the term "anecdote") and a plot that organises them into causal relationships (Czarniawska



2004, 124). In working with the word "anecdote" I am offering a more conventional term for Bateson's "hit and miss epiphanies." At the same time I am aware of the low esteem attributed to anecdotes in the empirical epistemology of the academy. The term "anecdotal evidence" is often used pejoratively. It is of course impossible to generalise from "mere" anecdote. But this is not my purpose in offering storied accounts of incidents from my practice.

I use the term "anecdote" in the sense given by Robert Frykenberg (2001) of a special form of story characterised by "its peculiar and unique potential for conveying the very essence of truths and understanding about human experience" (Frykenberg 2001, 119). It is not just a small story but what Stendahl describes as *le petit fait vrai* variously translated as "little actual happening," "small hard truth," or "little true fact" (Frykenberg 2001, 136). The Greek term *anekdota* (literally, something "not given out, not published") hints at the origins of the word in memorable events that have not been published. It is its association with such striking incidents, or surprising experience (Gadamer 1989) that makes it useful for my purpose. Anecdotes also possess a speculative and emergent character in the sense implied by Bourdieu's doxic experience. They allow questions to hang in the air, open to possibilities. This is a similar intention to what Boje (2001) calls antenarrative - that which comes before narrative, before memory is reified into story. It is still in a state of flux, of coming-to-be. "It is reflection under way," (Boje 2001, 5) in the middle of life, in process.

The anecdotes I offer in this thesis serve as metonyms of my practice. They provide a glimpse into my way of being in the world. It is tempting to work over these stories in rigorous reflective cycles of analysis and commentary. This has been a learning edge in my inquiry, allowing these stories to enter the public arena and not completely closing down their potential meanings to serve an explicit purpose. In this I am following Frank (1995) who makes the important distinction between thinking *about* stories and thinking *with* stories. "To think about a story is to reduce it to content and then analyse the content. Thinking with stories takes the story as already complete; there is no going beyond it" (Frank 1995, 23). An

example may help. Part of the following story was told in the Introduction but, in this context, I will re-work it to illustrate the practice of thinking *with* stories.

It took me 17 minutes to walk from the office to my hotel and, in the evening, it was normally a pleasant experience. Although temperatures during the day in Nicosia could reach the low 40's by the time I finished work there was a cool breeze and the walk was a refreshing break from the enclosed confines of the office.

The mid-evening traffic is quite heavy and I had to be careful as I crossed the roads. Even the pavements in Cyprus are obstacle courses. The paving stones are uneven and once without noticing I stepped into a space where a paving slab was missing. The slab had obviously been removed to plant a tree - the hole was at the end of a long row of trees planted into the pavement. But this space was empty. I could have sprained my ankle.

My thoughts turned towards the amazing ability of my eyes, mind and feet to choreograph the movement of my body, adapting instantaneously to changes in the terrain. Most of the time it happens without conscious thought. I am amazed at the many different ways I might put my foot forward and how, with each step, it is able to commit my whole body weight to another unique place on "terra ferma".

I am reminded of a walk in the mountains near Zermatt in Switzerland. It happened 15 years ago. I had been given sabbatical leave from my work and choose to spend a couple of weeks walking in the Swiss mountains. It was early May and the snows had melted on the lower slopes but one day I decided to follow a path higher up and on a part of the mountain exposed to the north. There was still snow on the ground when I exited the train at Riffelalp and headed down the path. At times the path narrowed and I was faced with a drop to my left of several hundred metres. At other times the space widened creating even more uncertainty. For a time I was unable to

find the exact route of the path through the snow and I wondered whether I should turn around.

Because of the uncertainties, my steps were more carefully planned and I took the time to test the ground under the snow before transferring my weight to my foot. My whole being was engaged in exploring, testing and committing myself to the next move. It was with some relief that, some 5 hours later, I returned safely to the town.

In everyday life, and with each step, my foot has to come down somewhere, making a split second decision about where and how to settle. Most of the time this occurs without thinking. It is an intuitive action, occasionally brought to my attention by an unexpected obstacle. My thoughts are out ahead, taking in the surroundings, possibly searching for a glimpse of my destination. Meanwhile my feet are adjusting step by step to the ground beneath and my brain is instantaneously assessing the conditions and coordinating my torso, limbs and feet in an apparently effortless balance in motion.

Everyday experience often feels like the snow covered mountain path and the idea of reflecting later on what I might have done has no value. My recall of the details would be incomplete and I would have no way of knowing whether a different choice would have worked out better. When I have tried to "reflect-on-action" I have felt it to be limited, even contrived; determined by the subconscious selections of my memory and my current intentions.

(September 2004)

As I read over this short narrative I am struck by the everyday nature of the experience - a walk back to my hotel from the office and a hike in the Swiss mountains. The writing process gives them significance, triggering a reflection on how my experience of the world around me sharpens my self-awareness (paragraph 3) and how this brought to memory another walking experience, one

anecdote connecting to another, embedding itself in the narrative. The last two paragraphs move to a different level of reflection as I notice thoughts awakened by the anecdotes that reinforce my growing unease with the limitations of reflective practice. So the narrative development yields an insight with wider implications - a case of thinking *with* stories. In constructing an account of my professional practice in this way I am proposing a narrative way of knowing (Bruner 1986), a narrative epistemology.

As already described, narrative involves the purposeful linking of fragmented, non-linear, apparently random events into a larger story. The key feature of such linkage is plot, the movement from one learning experience to another. Plots provide movement and offer the reader a structure that helps make sense of the story. In this way they must offer plausible access to the chain of actions and events on which they are built. Czarniawska suggests "that plot can be fruitfully considered to be the work's theory" (Czarniawska 2004, 124). So, as the narrative structure, or plot, emerges in my writing, the thesis offers a "theory" of practice that is held in the narrative. It has a mythopoetic character (literally the construction of reality from story, *poesis* being the Greek word for "the making" and etymologically the origin of the word poetry), the narrative process of interpretative and imaginative creation giving shape to the "hit and miss epiphanies" of past experience. The narrative serves mimetically as my theory. The reader must judge whether it offers plausible access to the ebb and flow of my action in the world and justifies my claim that it serve as a metaphor of my professional practice. "A story knows more than its teller" (O'Donohue 1999, 147).

## A Religious Quest

It should have become clear to the reader that this inquiry is not framed in a positivist paradigm in which everything can be known. Each experience drives me further into the mystery of life itself and teases me into Teannalach's deeper levels of awareness. Such inquiry is finally, I suggest, *theonomous* - that is, it has to do

with God. But here I need to tread carefully. What do I mean by the referent "God"? I am not writing of the God of philosophy - the metaphysical concept of God as the ground of being. Writing of this god Heidegger concludes: "Man can neither pray nor sacrifice to this god. Before the *causa sui*, man can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music and dance before this god" (Heidegger 1969, 72). No wonder our culture has signed his death certificate.

Ricoeur (2000), also criticises attempts to reduce the referent "God" to a form of knowledge. His solution, however, is to recall the episode in which Moses faced the bush that was on fire, although it was not consumed (Exodus 3:3-15). Here Moses discovers God as the unnameable name. If the people ask Moses who has sent him he is to say "I am has sent me to you." And then, in a significant insight into this ambiguity, God expands on the "I am" by proposing that Moses say, "The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent you. This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations." In other words, God can only be known in the particular story of "your fathers". There is no "positive ontology capable of capping off the narrative and other namings" (Ricoeur 2000,174).

God's answer to Moses not only names God in the story of his predecessors but invites him to take the story forward. In revealing his identity God is calling Moses to action, to liberate his people from slavery. It is as if God is known in his relationships to people (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) who in their actions take the story forward. And the story, and with it, God's identity, will continue. So in Moses' response to the call, God becomes the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob ... and Moses.

A burning bush was probably not uncommon in the semi-arid environment in which Moses kept his sheep. But this one was not consumed. Liminal moments (Turner 1995) like these can turn up in the most routine circumstances and their significance easily missed. Only when Moses turned to look, when he paid attention to the phenomenon, did God speak. Henry (1999), in exploring this story,

notes that Jewish legend asks a question that is not answered in the Bible. What sort of voice did Moses hear? Was it, asks Henry, the deep solemn bass of Cecil B DeMille's choice in the film *The Ten Commandments*? Perhaps, the legend suggests, it was the voice of his own father whom he had hardly known since they had been separated a few months after his birth. A haunting and intimate touch, reinforcing the idea that once Moses had stopped to pay attention to the burning bush he was drawn into a web of connections across the generations that called him to action.

Understandably Moses is reticent to fulfil the call and God offers no certainty about the outcome. "This shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain" (Exodus 3:11-12). The only guarantee is "that when you have done what I am sending you to do, you will have done it." (Henry 1999, 104). God speaks to the Moses who is yet to be, who is capable of liberating his people. "God listens to what I may become, and therefore challenges me to come out of myself in order to become myself" (ibid).

Heron (1996) locates belief before knowledge, suggesting that the warrant for belief may make a claim plausible but that this is not as well-founded as knowledge. Research, he suggests, "seeks to convert plausible belief into well-founded knowledge" (1996, 52-53). In religious circles, however, it is often the case that belief acts as a source of certainty. Religious belief claims its origins in revelation and is convinced that its truth is a divine deposit. Either the bible or the church may serve as its repository. Parker Palmer (1993) describes the way "the spiritual traditions have been used to obstruct inquiry rather than encourage it" (1993, xi). With this in mind Ellul's (1983) distinction between belief and faith is helpful. Belief provides answers, he suggests, faith does not; faith listens while belief talks: "it wallows in words" (1983, 101); faith presupposes doubt, whereas belief excludes it. According to Ellul, "the purpose of revelation is *not* to supply us with explanations .. but to confront us with questions .. to get us to listen to questions" (ibid, 100). So faith does not rush to "convert plausible belief into well

founded knowledge” (Heron 1996). Faith lingers with what is unknown, enabling me to navigate its uncertain terrain with hope.

From early childhood I have been immersed in the Christian narrative. It is woven into the fabric of my memories, dreams, hopes and fears. These stories have, at the best of times, provided inspiration for my way of being in the world. They have shaped what Turner (1974) calls the “root paradigms”, the mostly unquestioned assumptions about the nature of the world, that have carried me through life. Yet I am not a passenger or a dispassionate observer. I am a participant in this story. Like Moses I feel the responsibility to take the story forward and in so doing, to disclose fresh insights into its meaning. So living by faith, for me, is to live life as inquiry, embracing the questions that make me responsible (that is obliged to respond) and throw me back upon my freedom, taking me to a place where I risk myself in the answers I give and the actions I take (Ellul 1983). In the words of Michael Novak (1971), the religious drive “is, in itself, the restlessness with disharmony, the dissatisfaction with inconsistency, the demand that feelings match thoughts, thoughts words, words actions and actions the dynamism of life ... It is the drive to raise ever further questions, to venture new actions, to expose oneself to new experiences” (Novak 1971, 5). Living life as inquiry and venturing new actions is my way of taking the story forward. This results in my own unique anecdotes, often faltering and inadequate, that nevertheless seek to mirror the larger story to which I owe allegiance.

In the spirit of narrative inquiry let me think with a personal story. Pope John-Paul II died on April 2nd 2005. At the time I was serving as Programme Controller for a satellite television network in the Middle East. Six months earlier I had been asked, as a non-executive member of the Board of Directors, to take on this part time executive role in order to help launch a five year strategy. I quickly learned that the management style of the organisation was autocratic. It was lead by a very capable former engineer with clear ideas on where and how he wanted it to grow. He ran the organisation on the edge financially and functionally, putting enormous pressure on his staff to deliver. He had a reputation for unilateral interventions

which had demotivated staff. Management meetings were a facade. They often ended up with a public lynching of a member of the team for failures in performance. Rarely were collective decisions implemented, so that senior staff took little initiative.

The broadcast operations were complex. Programming was produced in several countries of the region. Schedule planning was located in Cyprus and broadcast operations were in London. This needed careful coordination and professional management. When the Pope's health deteriorated at the beginning of that week I had checked on our state of readiness and ensured that adequate procedures were in place. The production team in Lebanon had prepared a feature length tribute and it was ready, on the server in London, to be broadcast on instruction from the Scheduling Manager. As far as I was concerned everything was in order.

The Pope died at 21:37 Central Europe Time on Saturday evening. A short while before, the CEO phoned me to ask whether everything was ready for broadcast. I repeated the procedure we had put in place. The Scheduling Manager would monitor the news and was authorised to phone the transmission centre in London to interrupt the normal schedule. I was satisfied that the procedure was clear and I had confidence in the team. I went to bed.

I woke the next morning to the news of the Pope's death and immediately phoned the Scheduling Manager. She was clearly upset. Minutes before she had taken a phone call from the CEO who had scolded her for not acting more promptly. Apparently at midnight, without contacting either of us, the CEO had called the London transmission centre and authorised the broadcast of the obituary himself. When he picked me up at my hotel a couple of hours later I had hardly climbed into the car before I was reprimanded. In my journal later I wrote:

"The angry criticism that greeted me when I climbed into the car on Sunday felt like the corrections of a headmaster rather than the concerns of a



professional colleague. Before we had even left the car park I had been pushed onto the defensive."

Even now I recall a tightening in my neck and the pinching of my voice. I tried to explain the importance of giving the staff responsibility. I had confidence in the Scheduling Manager's abilities and was planning to review the chain of events with her for our mutual learning. Besides, I suggested, in delaying transmission of the programme until Sunday morning it would have given us a much larger audience. But my responses were rebuffed. The CEO was convinced that being the first station to pay tribute to the Pope was all that mattered.

I am not proud of my actions in the initial confrontation. Two different value judgements collided. I was pushed onto the defensive and took the bait, mounting arguments for my values against my opponent. In a world in which self exists over against the other, power is unilateral. I didn't learn this from the Christian narrative.

Drawing from insights in performance studies (music and theatre) Fodor and Hauerwas (2000) explore the idea of faith as performance. What might have happened if in the incident above, as the barrage of criticism hit me as I was fastening my seat belt, I had drawn breath long enough to view the encounter as an opportunity for imaginative improvisation, anticipating the impending confrontation and deflecting the attack? Fodor and Hauerwas suggest the tactic of "out-narrating" the other, receiving the contribution of others as potential gifts. Working with the ideas of Samuel Wells they suggest that: "Performing the Christian faith chiefly entails "working out how to accept ... things that present themselves as 'givens' but which are not"" (Fodor and Hauerwas 2000, 391). This resembles in some ways Torbert's (2004) fourth part of speech, what he calls framing, although as I see it this involves not just naming the frame, but transforming the "gift" by receiving it as a contribution within the frame of what Hauerwas calls, "The Peaceable Kingdom" (Hauerwas 1991). What does the gift look like framed in this story?

This is easier to write about than practice. Working out how to accept the attack while struggling with the pain it has inflicted is hard. It is too easy to act in ways that foreclose the story rather than find, in the moment, ways of keeping it going. As Fodor and Hauerwas (2000) point out, the distinguishing feature of the Christian story is its peaceable character. This ontological bias towards peace rather than conflict is in contrast to an ethics built on the Cartesian self - the self that exists over against the other, that sees the other in relation to the self which, if resisted, must be coerced or disempowered (Olthuis 1997). Olthuis quotes the theologian Paul Tillich's definition of such power as "the possibility a being has to actualize itself against the resistance of other beings" (Olthuis 1997, 238). To be a self in this way of being is to have enemies and fosters a world in which violence and conflict dominate the social environment.

What then, leads to peace? How then to accept the attack, to embrace the difference, to situate the incident in a more peaceable narrative? After the initial encounter I decided to draft a memo to the CEO. This gave me an opportunity to craft a response that invited a wider discussion about the direction of the organisation and the empowerment of its people. It also provided the space for him, in his own time, to read and respond. I concluded the memo with these words: "I would like us to talk about this together. You will have other perspectives that need to be included and I don't expect this to be easy or comfortable for either of us. I just know it is essential. And a final word - whatever else you "read" into these words I trust that you sense respect, love and commitment."

The conversation never happened. Issues as complex as these are rarely resolved in the moment or in one incident. Sometimes all we can do is offer a gesture of love. But what emerged from this experience, for me, was a sense of letting go, of being released from responsibility for the outcome. Fodor and Hauerwas compare this to the way a performer becomes so involved in their performance that they are possessed or taken over by the work (Fodor and Hauerwas 2000, 397). These moments of "ecstasy" (ek-stasis) can be compared to Heidegger's releasement - times when we let go of our personal agendas and experience ourselves as

participants in a shared event that is greater than ourselves (Guignon 2004), recognising that "love is the difference that matters" (Olthuis 1997, 249). This is not, I suggest, an invitation to passivity but a way of thinking of our action in the world that synchronises with its rhythm, keeping in time with God's slow, peaceable, reconciling grace. This attitude nurtures a patience that recognises that the kingdom of God is not fully realised; that prays in all situations, "your kingdom come, your will be done"; and, that embraces the stubbornness and incorrigibility of the people and systems that dominate the world in hope that they can be transformed, even if the process may involve, as in the case of Jesus, suffering and death.

"There are three things that last forever:  
faith, hope and love;  
and the greatest of the three is love"  
(1 Corinthians 13:13).



## Chapter Three

### First You have to Row a Little Boat

*I daresay you haven't had much practice*

The White Queen to Alice  
Through the Looking Glass  
Lewis Carroll (1871)

*How warped the mirrors where our worlds are made*

In Sickness and in Health  
WH Auden (1945)

In the spirit of Desert Island Discs I can imagine that one of the distractions I might have chosen to fill the hours at sea on Brendan's boat, when I was not at the oar or keeping watch, would be a book of Sudoku puzzles. Sudoku appeals to my linear mind, trained to solve problems. I'm not a master player but I still find myself drawn to the nine by nine grid in a newspaper before much of the news. Once I've worked through the obvious choices it becomes a matter of holding two or more possible solutions in my head of the kind, "if this was two then that would be five and this would mean that would be one", mentally adjusting the options until the choice falls into place. Often it's a case of elimination, paying attention to the consequences and then making a decision. Sometimes I get stuck, my eyes wandering across the grid, not finding anywhere I can make progress. I may set it aside to return later when the next step appears obvious (why didn't I see it earlier?). There is only one right solution to a Sudoku puzzle and it doesn't change while I am trying to solve it. But Sudoku is also unforgiving. If I enter a wrong number in one of its boxes the puzzle cannot be solved. One wrong step and the whole exercise is lost.

I also notice how easily I discard a completed puzzle. I feel no need to keep the newspaper as a trophy. The task is completed, and I am left with a mild sense of satisfaction. This is a metaphor of life and its challenges. Each "puzzle" requires a different level of attention and the tough ones call for increasing mental agility but once the task is accomplished I move on. Yet something remains - a mental ability that has been stretched, or used in different ways, developing techniques that will serve the next challenge.

My early encounter with reflective practice also appealed to my linear, problem solving mind. The experiencing, observing, conceptualising and experimenting (acting) cycle (Kolb 1984, Coghlan & Brannick 2005) made good sense. There was, it seemed to me, a technical/rational way of approaching reflective practice and action research. I was looking for models of good practice I could adopt in my teaching. I assumed that they existed "out there" and my research would find them. Their benefits would be self-evident. I saw action research as a technology (McNiff 2002, 52). I was a technician wanting to manipulate the components of learning in new ways. A little practice and I would be able to use them myself. But, as Mead notes, "action inquiry is not a standard technique that can be applied (like a coat of paint) to meet every need....it must be crafted to its particular circumstances and context" (Mead 2001, 260). What is also clear now, some time later, is that when I first experimented with reflective practice, I gave no attention to my 'self' and took for granted that improving my professional performance would simply involve the acquisition of new skills and the design of new tools. It took time for me to see myself as both the subject and the instrument of research (Richardson 2004).

This was not an easy part of the journey. In what follows I will explore my emerging appreciation for what I have called "living my inquiry" and reflect on incidents in my teaching and consulting practice in which I became aware of my particular presence and action the world. Although drawing from phenomenology and narrative inquiry it is rooted in the reflective practice paradigm first discussed by Schon (1983). This involves attention and reflection, in-action and on-action, on

the assumptions, beliefs, values, motivations and intentions that give direction to my being-in-the-world. It goes beyond what Argyris (1985) called "single-loop" reflection that questions my actions, to include "double-loop" analysis that questions my existing frames of reference. And it moves into the territory of "triple-loop learning" described by Stroobants et al (2007) as addressing the question not just "how can I *act* differently?" (single-loop), or "how can I *think* differently?" (double loop), but "how can I *be* different?"

This has both inward and outward dimensions, looking inward to notice and adjust the way I perceive and act in the world and looking outward to notice how I connect and engage with others. This is what Marshall (2001) calls "self-reflective inquiry", an attempt to understand myself as an inquiring person in both a personal and professional sense. While I am accountable to various stakeholders for the results of this work I am also aware that the impulse for my actions lies in a set of values or standards, what Whitehead (2006) calls "living standards" by which I judge myself.

## Recognising Different Sources of Knowledge

In the late 1990's I had an opportunity to set up an MA in Communication Practice designed for media practitioners working in the non-western world. In writing my research goals for the purposes of MPhil/PhD registration, I described the programme in this way:

"The MA in Communication Practice (validated by the University of Wales) was launched in 1999 as a full time residential programme.... The programme is designed for media practitioners from the non-western world and is offered in reflective practice mode, privileging the student's professional experience as a legitimate source of knowledge. Most students are attracted to the programme because of its commitment to explore professional practice from a Christian value base, an unusual posture in a profession that espouses journalistic

independence. The success of the programme can be attributed in part to the enrolment of small cohorts, an emphasis on interactive learning, the use of peer reviewed journaling, and other social learning methods."

These features developed through experience. The small group of people who first gathered to design the programme were mostly practitioners with little knowledge (and a lot of assumptions) about the requirements of the UK academic establishment. Our first proposal for validation was quite safe, drawing on the established curriculum of other institutions. Our assumption was that the contextual and practical issues that we wanted to explore could be handled in the cracks of the curriculum, but by the end of the first year it was clear that the course design was too rigid. The students themselves had taken the initiative to search out some of the emerging research being done in their own contexts on the edges of the Western academy. It encouraged us, as a faculty, to explore this terrain for ourselves, seeking insights from the non-western margins of communication research.

Even more seriously we had not anticipated the problems the students would encounter in applying the theory to their practice. They struggled to engage critically with the literature and floundered in its application. Was this simply the price they would have to pay to be credentialed through a UK university? Shortly after starting the course a student from the Middle East posted a message on the online student common room that echoed the experience of others:

"I have been reading this book on communication since Friday, and I found it very hard to understand!!..... Studying after 15 years of quitting school is scary! Especially if you are studying in a different country, using a foreign language to write, read, comment and even to think. I am reading and taking notes but I feel my brain is at risk! I really thought seriously to quit .... afraid I am not up to an MA degree!!! I am



afraid from mistakes, afraid from bad marks, afraid from failing, afraid of misunderstanding subjects, afraid ..afraid ..afraid..."

In the third year of the programme and with the encouragement of the Academic Dean we introduced an elective course on reflective practice based on a self-managed study pack he had designed for another programme. The experience opened my eyes. Within a month of beginning this course (with just four students) I recommended that the module be made a core course. It was exciting to read the formative work prepared by the students and listen to their stories in seminars. I recall the stimulation and pleasure I felt in re-working the study pack for the following year to make it more specific to the media field. It was my introduction to reflective practice and the contribution of action research to professional practice. The course quickly became the core component of what we called the Integrative Strand - a feature of the programme that was responsible for forty percent of assessment in Part One.

The stories I began to hear in the seminars made me aware of the fund of knowledge brought by the learner. Although, in my teaching of communication, I encouraged the students to trust the intelligence of their audience and create programming that leaves people with questions that would stimulate self-discovery, I had not connected this advice to my own practice as a teacher. My theory-in-use conflicted with my espoused theory (Argyris 1999). But as I listened to the stories I began to change my way of working with the students. Most of them came from established careers in newspapers, radio and television in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. I started to tell them, at the beginning of the course, "the most important textbook you will read this year is your own experience." At first they didn't believe me. They had come to England to gain exposure to the finest examples of media practice and their university library card was a ticket to the source of all wisdom! Why come to the UK to think about what they have left behind?

## Aspirations of Phronetic Practice

This chapter involved me in cycles of inquiry as I worked with students in the development of their inquiring skills. Sometimes this was collaborative in nature. At others I was consciously making decisions "in-the-moment" that influence my actions without the overt participation of others. This was the case, for example, in my attempts to find ways of helping a cohort of students read the text of their own management experience. I began the module by inviting them to discuss amongst themselves a series of questions:

"How do things get done in your culture?"

"How do you decide what needs to be done?"

"Who organises the work?"

"How is success rewarded?"

This line of inquiry with the group was deliberate. My aim was to invite them to read their personal text before being introduced to the vast literature on management. My reasoning was that if they could find the language to voice their own experience and articulate their values and beliefs they would be in a better place to engage in a rigorous dialogue with the literature with a view to improving their practice.

In preparation for a later session I wrestled with the question, "what might open a conversation between "good practice" in the West and their own experiences?" We watched the BBC documentary on "Eldorado", the hugely expensive soap opera launched by the BBC in the early 1990's in a frantic attempt to maintain audience share and justify the continuation of the television licence. The documentary, produced ten years later as a part of the series "Trouble at the Top", exposed a catalogue of management failures that resulted in its cancellation within a year of launch. Even the world's biggest broadcasting organisation can get it wrong.

The discussion following the video was animated. I was pleased to see that everyone had something to contribute and the group was interacting well with each other, picking up and developing each others comments. Poor casting, political interference and an impossible production schedule were quickly identified as causes for the failure. The students were surprised at the way the BBC management tried to solve the problems by firing members of the production team. It soon became clear that this would not happen in their cultures - 'back home', I was told, people are valued more than time.

We hadn't talked about management theory in the traditional sense but they had given voice to their management experience (presentational knowing, (Heron 1996)) and identified several ways in which it differed from western practice. Parker Palmer (1998) talks about the creative tensions, which he calls 'paradoxes', that are essential to good teaching and learning. One of them is the creation of a space which honours "the 'little' stories of the individual and the 'big' stories of the disciplines and tradition." (Palmer 1998, 76). The session had provided an opportunity for little stories to interact with a big story and the experience strengthened my resolve to honour the practitioner as an expert system. Although students are comfortable with their little stories the academy rarely welcomes them and they cannot imagine the value attached to their own stories since "education so seldom treats their lives as sources of knowledge." (Palmer 1998, 81)

It sometimes takes time for students to gain the confidence to realise that their little stories can correct and refresh the big stories. And their stories can find a new depth of meaning when told alongside the big stories "that are universal in scope and archetypal in depth, that frame our personal tales and help us understand what they mean." (Palmer 1998, 76). I tell students to be alert to the possibility, even probability, that the academy and its body of knowledge might be so intimidating that their own stories are silenced.

My inquiries, in the early stages of this work, were fairly quiet, first person affairs. I was feeling my way, practicing my attentional skills (Mason 2002, Marshall 1999,

2004) and trying to understand how to manage my inquiries in the moment (reflection-in-action, Schon 1983). The discipline of "noticing myself perceiving, making meaning, framing issues, choosing how to speak out, and so on," (Marshall 1999) was, and remains challenging. It takes time to develop these qualities but I feel I am now more aware of questioning the assumptions I use and the interventions I choose.

Action inquiry, it seems to me, involves two vital steps. First, it requires the "discipline of noticing" in Mason's (2002) words, a quality of attention that has the potential to answer the question I first learned from our Academic Dean, "What is going on when what is going on is going on?" Torbert (2003, 2004) identifies four territories of experience - outcomes, actions, goals and intentions - and calls the practice of attention in all four territories "supervision" (Torbert et al 2004, 18). Barber (2006) suggests that experiential reality is laminated and can be perceived at five levels: sensory/physical, social/cultural, emotional/transferential, imagined/projective and intuitive/transpersonal. This ability to perceive, to give attention to layers of significance in the familiar and everyday, can turn the ordinary into extraordinary insight.

The second step in Action Inquiry involves intentional choice that results in action resourced by the insight. Assuming speech to be the principle form of action, Torbert (2003, 2004) suggests a choice between four "parts of speech" - inquiring, illustrating, advocating and framing (Torbert et al 2004, 27) - a model that has informed my practice, as some of the anecdotes to follow will demonstrate. The emphasis on inquiry leading on to choice-full action is a feature of "deliberative inquiry" (Coles 2002), making this term more helpful, to me, than the general notion of reflective practice.

Multi-levelled awareness and intentional action is evidence of practical wisdom. Several authors (for example, Flyvbjerg 2001, Coles 2002, Wall 2003, Frank 2004) have recently called for a greater appreciation of Aristotle's third intellectual virtue, *phronesis*, in the social sciences, alongside of *episteme* (scientific knowledge) and

*techne* (technical knowledge). *Episteme* is concerned with universal laws and *techne* with the production of useful artifacts. After associating *episteme* with the head, and *techne* with the hand, Frank goes on to say,

“Thinking about *phronesis* after Pascal, I am inclined, perhaps with violence to Aristotle, to think of it as being of the heart, in the sense of that which exceeds reason. *Phronesis* is the type of knowledge for which we lack any contemporary English term, which may be a bigger part of our problem than we realize: contemporary society has lost the understanding that *phronesis* is necessary to becoming a complete human. Thus, we fail to train people for it.” (Frank 2004, 221)

The activities described in the teaching incident above can be viewed in this light. Attending to their own experience, bringing attention to “how things get done” in their own context, and working with a visual example of bad practice in the West to highlight their own experience, were steps that I hoped would help the students to probe their own values and therefore developing a phronetic awareness of the choices they might make in the future. As Paulo Freire says, “The starting point for organizing the program content of education or political action must be the present, existential, concrete situation, reflecting the aspirations of the people ... The investigation of what I have termed the people’s ‘thematic universe’ - the complex of their ‘generative themes’ - inaugurates the dialogue of education as the practice of freedom.” (Freire 1970, 76-77).

## Living My Inquiry

But of equal importance is the way in which my own action inquiry helps develop my phronetic practice (*praxis*). The Centre where I worked convenes a weekly Research Seminar at which a member of the research community presents their work-in-progress for peer review. In March 2006, an experienced child adoption worker and a new research student (whom I will call Susan), was scheduled to

present her research proposal. She contacted me the day before for advice on the possibility of taking an action research approach to her interest in understanding and improving the quality of attachment involved in the adoption of older Chinese children by western parents. I felt some anxiety for her as she described her intention to journey with adopting families through the adoptive process. While she was interested in understanding the positive and negative relational experiences contributing to the attachment process she seemed particularly aware of the complexity of the older adoptive child. Her own experience of working in adoption had exposed her to problems in the "clarity and consistency of practice in preparation of the adoptive parents."

She had drafted her research proposal in the traditional form, including a set of hypotheses to be tested and describing the methodology (standard quantitative and qualitative tests) she was intending to use. I sensed some frustration in this requirement and asked her to consider what it might be like if she could enter these relationships without a tool box. By initially suspending judgement on what she experienced she might uncover other forms of knowing relevant to her inquiry. I was pleased to hear her share this possibility in the Research Seminar the following day. The response was swift. (Direct quotations are taken from a transcript of an audio recording of the seminar. The identity of individuals involved has been obscured by the use of pseudonyms).

Terry (a member of the faculty): "What do you mean by suspending your judgement - surely you intend to build on what you already know? And, what is your disciplinary background for this work?"

Susan: "My undergraduate studies were in the social sciences."

Terry: "You will need to be aware of the state of knowledge in this domain - you must fill a gap on which others can build by taking the research into the representative area. What gap are you planning to fill?"

I felt a slight discomfort and was uncertain about whether to step in but another faculty member jumped in first.

Bill (another member of faculty): "You are talking about a sample of three families that you intend to study. Why three? What do you expect to conclude from this sample? How reliable will your conclusions be?"

I could see that Susan was unsure about the questions. I drew breath and leapt into the discussion.

Dave (me): "Surely what Susan needs to decide is whether she is going to undertake a sample at all. As I understand her goal she wants to get deeply involved in a limited number of adoptive relationships rather than survey the field to identify general principles, as so many have already done. It may not be appropriate for her to be limited to the discourse provided by attachment theory. She has listed a number of hypotheses in her proposal - I suggested to her that she read these as assumptions rather than hypotheses to be tested, and then initially suspend the temptation to "read" her experience through these assumptions."

A research student entered the discussion. "I am still unclear about your field research - what do you intend to show from your field work? Are you interested in the adopted child or in exploring best practice in adoption?"

Susan: "The latter - I want to facilitate improvements in current practice."

Dave: "Sometimes it is not possible to offer generalisations. Donald Schon talks about "reflective transfer", the process by which knowledge disclosed in one situation triggers the adoption of similar approaches to understanding in another situation in a suggestive, almost inspirational, way.

Bill: "It seems to me, David, that you are giving us two options, neither of which I want. Maybe generalisation is not possible but more stories won't help either.

There must be a middle ground in which Susan can offer some guidance and advice to adoptive parents. The research should help people understand what they are letting themselves in for. There are already so many stories..."

Dave: "...often lacking critical reflection..."

Bill: "That may be so but surely you want to offer more than a good story - it is a highly risky and improbable activity to just produce some inspirational literature. I want something more..."

Dave: "But Bill, as I listen to your own experience, I can see the value of Susan's research. You have just told us about your personal experience in adopting two children yourself and the unique challenges you faced." (Bill had described in quite personal terms some of the challenges he and his wife had faced in adopting one child of Greek background and a second who was half Pakistani and half Irish). "You said yourself that each relationship is unique and you had very different relationships with each of them - you actually called it "a mystery". Rather than offer a set of general principles I think Susan wants to enter that mystery. She may not produce universal guidelines but she could offer critical insight into the process of attachment in several particular cases."

Bill: Of course not everything can be contained in a rule book, but could produce useful knowledge.

As I reflected later on the seminar I realised that I had been quite assertive in my interventions and recall a feeling of outrage at the way other faculty were trying to frame the study. I was therefore surprised when the Research Degrees Committee subsequently accepted her proposal, appointing the Academic Dean as her supervisor and inviting me to serve as her House Tutor. The role of House Tutor is primarily pastoral but in this particular case, because of Susan's interest in action research, the Dean included me in the supervision process.



Like so many other research students Susan was part time so it was not until the beginning of November that she returned to the UK. I had no idea that 15 years earlier she and her husband had adopted a four year old Chinese girl. As she began to tell me about the experience I sensed she was beginning to touch an emotional nerve. In the next few days she wrote, "I had never intended to adopt a child and although F (the child) was not the incentive for my research I now realise that she has become my partner in research, along with my husband. The actual driving force (for my research) began 15 years earlier and continued throughout those years of practice."

Later a fellow student told me that the next morning she had found Susan in her study carrel weeping. I learned that she had been writing an account of a conversation she had with her new daughter five days after the adoption (based on her journal records of the time). Reflecting on my invitation to tell her story, she had written,

"I found myself inwardly resisting, not wanting to go there. I have successfully avoided redressing those experiences for 15 years. Until this morning I unconsciously thought I had found a way to use them for the greater good. I know better, experiences of trauma cannot be stuffed. They remain inside unless we are willing to allow them out. I have only just begun writing and already I am wondering if I can pull myself together sufficiently to meet with my director today."

This experiential knowledge also seemed to influence her approach to the research literature. She had clearly read widely on the topic of attachment. In the same reflective piece quoted above she concluded that her literature survey

"can be never ending because of the numerous and intricately designed pieces of research found under attachment theory... If I cannot find answers of how attachment and trust develop in the most accepted methods of

research in attachment theory then I must explore the answers within the context of practice. This has become my reason for using action research."

Just a few weeks later, at the end of her residence, I received a brief email from the Dean in which he said, "Susan is very pleased indeed with how she has emerged from her struggles and feels she has made a personal breakthrough in her understanding of herself as a researcher. She feels she is going home a different person."

## **Developing the Inquiry**

Twelve months after Susan's first seminar she was back at the Centre and preparing for a second encounter with the lions. She had struggled to write a paper for discussion in the Research Seminar and was discouraged by the comment she had received from the Tutor responsible for coordinating the seminars that "there is nothing here to present in the seminar." I disagreed. Although her paper lacked structure it contained some very personal accounts of her experience of adoption, including the story of a very personal experience with her daughter 3 years after the adoption. The seminar would provide an opportunity for her to give voice to her methodology and I felt that this would help build her confidence as a researcher. I had been asked to chair the seminar and so encouraged her to press ahead. I met with her two days before the seminar to think with her, of how together, we could create a liberating space (Torbert 1991) that would enable the participants to catch a glimpse of her alternative research paradigm.

The room in which the research seminar is normally held is long and narrow with a large table surrounded by chairs down the middle. It is usually crowded with between thirty and thirty five people sitting cramped in the corners and across the open doorway. The room is not conducive to collective inquiry and I therefore requested a change of room. We met in an open space where the chairs could be arranged in different patterns so that we were able to reconfigure the layout during

the session. At the beginning of the seminar I suggested that the physical re-location was an analogy for the mental shift that would be required during the seminar. I should point out that the weekly Research Seminar is required attendance for all research students in residence and involves most of the resident faculty. Although working in many different fields and at different stages of their research journey most are located in the positivist tradition.

After she had briefly introduced her work and her interest in attachment I asked her to describe the difficulty she had in relating her inquiry to the substantial body of research literature in the field. She explained what happened when she tried to relate her experiences to the studies of attachment disorder which focussed on the pathology. While she could see these features in her own experiences they "didn't work" in her words as a way of explaining what was going on. "All focussed on the problem in one aspect" (direct quotes are taken from a transcription of the audio recording of the seminar). By looking at Bowlby's "internal working model" or the individual patterns of attachment, for example, key features of the overall process of attachment were missing. So she decided "This isn't working so I am just going to write the story so I sat down and wrote it as a story."

Dave (me): "So you've ended up with story - or as you now describe it 'narrative inquiry'. What is narrative inquiry and why do you think it will overcome the problems you have found?"

Susan: "At first I just wrote the story. I didn't think about grammar, but I was careful to bring in the elements of what happened, and around that I wanted to convey the experience, the emotions of it, the continuum of how it evolved. Later I corrected the grammar, etc and then I went back and read it over and "all of a sudden" I saw connections that I hadn't seen before and saw movement in the process ... When I went back in story form I saw the whole picture and I began to identify my adopted daughter's struggle and could see when her attachment system has just clicked in because of what she has experienced. I noticed her facial

expressions and struggle with whether to move towards attachment or stay within what we call "survival." I could see this in the story."

The participants were ready to enter the conversation. Simon, one of the faculty spoke first, informing us that he was an adopting parent himself and therefore has a personal interest in attachment theory. He said, "attachment theory is a descriptive framework not a research method, so I think narrative is the most appropriate methodology to adopt. However, my question is in the distinction you make between narrative analysis and analysis of narrative. Is this distinction valid? Is this semantics?"

A student jumped into the conversation with a different comment so it was a little while before I was able to bring this question back into play. This "time out" was helpful, providing a brief moment for me to reflect on how we might work generatively with Simon's question. Before inviting Susan to comment I invited others to contribute, to tap into the collective knowledge. "Is there a useful distinction between narrative analysis and analysis of narrative?" I asked. Paula, a student involved in analysing life stories, chipped in to explain that she was involved in analysing narratives but that narrative analysis is not just looking at a story. Susan interrupted,

Susan: "I have to create the story ... "

Paula: "She's creating the story and she's bringing into it what she's looking at. Bruner might help here. Have you explained his distinction between paradigmatic reasoning and narrative reasoning?"

Susan: ".. No, I didn't." She was looking towards Paula as she spoke. After a brief silence she added, "... You go ahead .. you're doing fine." They laugh nervously at their hesitation. "You do the paradigmatic and I'll do the diachronic," she offered. And together they offered a brief explanation of the difference. I picked up on the distinction.

Dave: "What Susan is attempting, and this is where the distinction is important, is to use narrative as a form of analysis - this is her methodology. She's got all the raw data of events, notes, memories and so on which she is crafting into a narrative that discloses aspects of the whole which would not be evident in other ways. There is provisional evidence of that here in your paper - you didn't notice things until you wrote the narrative.

Susan: "It was so surprising ..."

I invited her to say more about this but Simon was not satisfied with the discussion.

Simon: "Narrative is too large an entity to analyse as a whole. I guess it's the components that are analysed and not the narrative itself."

I interrupted him, "Ah, you can break down a narrative into its parts, but that is not narrative analysis. Narrative analysis is ..." Simon had not finished and I felt that he was trying to avoid eye contact with me. "What do you do," he continued, "with components such as the patterns she recognises ... there are elements in each narrative that need to be isolated from each other."

Susan: "It won't be just one story - and I am looking for movement, going back and forth. If I analyse it in its components I won't see this process."

Simon: "That's where my problem is."

Dave: "But you are thinking paradigmatically and she is thinking diachronically." The distinction had come out in Paula and Susan's discussion of Bruner and I now used it to drive home an epistemological nail. "It's a different way of thinking".

Another student entered the conversation to explore how Susan put together the narrative plot and the conversation moved on although I sensed that Simon was not satisfied.

In telling the story of my involvement with Susan over this period of time I have provided an opportunity for diachronic awareness. It is my intention to give attention, in particular, to my practice in this fractal of my work. This involved preparatory work in designing the seminar and establishing a communicative space (Kemmis 2001, Wicks & Reason 2009). In discussion with Susan I brought three explicit intentions to the task that can be stated succinctly:

- (1) to serve Susan as she developed her inquiry, helping her build confidence in her stories of practice,
- (2) to help develop her commitment to a more holistic appreciation of attachment built on “trust”, a theme that was emerging from her inquiry, and
- (3) to open a space in which other members of the research community might glimpse alternative ways of knowing and value narrative forms of inquiry - to facilitate a shared inquiry around these issues.

Taking an attitude of inquiry in-the-moment of practice involves a quality of attention and deliberation in many different areas. “Supervision” (Torbert et al 2004) over the four territories of experience was needed (and not particularly well practised) in facilitating the participation of different groups in the room - faculty, other research students, and Susan herself. This required attention to the way I and other participants were making sense of the experience and awareness of maintaining the space for others, attending to the process as well as the content. I acted intentionally, for example, to welcome Paula into the discussion and witnessed her slightly nervous exchange with Susan over Bruner’s distinction between paradigmatic and diachronic reasoning as opening a space for other tentative voices to be heard. As I review the story however, I wonder, for example, whether my intervention to “pick up on the distinction” was helpful and what was going on for others in the room as I summarised the issue. Although Susan was ready to say more about her surprising discovery, at least one person in the room, Simon, was not satisfied. There were clearly several levels of interaction involved.

The narrative form introduces other choices. There were other voices involved in the discussion that I have chosen to exclude. I have selected particular contributions to the dialogue to offer an account of this experience that I hope is alive and rich so as to give insight into my practice without overwhelming the reader with too much detail. I also acknowledge the way in which attentional skill, deliberative choice and narrative account are interweaved. I notice for example my claim to sense that Simon was not satisfied. He didn't speak again and, as I read the story now I wonder whether this was an interpretation I have made from his actions following the seminar (see below) that I have moved into the narrative at this point. I let the discussion move on in other directions. Was I aware, at this point, that for the group this line of inquiry had reached a point of saturation (Marshall 2004)? This may be nothing more than an intuition that lead me to act, permissively, in the situation. I have confidence that this "knowing-in-action" (Schon 1987) can mature over time, although I am aware that my purposes, prior experience and assumptions shape, unconsciously, my intuitions. Only fragments of this hidden knowledge can be brought to conscious attention in-the-moment. Such inquiries in-the-moment are always on the edge of knowing and not-knowing, of responding to one aspect of the experience at the expense of others. I will return to this aspect of the story later.

## **A Different Way of Knowing**

What I was about to suggest to the group in the seminar, offers an example of an innovation that was ready for expression in my practice. The faculty involved in managing the weekly research seminar have been told, on numerous occasions, that it is "the best research seminar in town". It has many good features: the diversity of research topics and fields of inquiry that are discussed, the variety of research scholars involved (involving senior academics as well as beginning researchers), and the constructive quality of many of its discussions, for example. However it tends to be cerebral, often involving intellectual ping pong between

different positions sponsored by faculty members, and attendees are unable to exercise anything but their brains, sitting cramped in its windowless venue.

In the second half of Susan's seminar I wanted to try something different. The experiment was to engage in a bit of improvisational drama to re-play the story Susan had shared. Although her paper had been circulated in advance I could not assume that everyone had read her story carefully so I suggested that they took some time to read it again. I recall my anxiety about the experiment. The five minutes of silence as everyone read the story seemed like a very long time and I was impatient to move into the activity - something I probably communicated unconsciously by the way I moved in my chair and gave time signals. I was in a hurry to get into the action. Listening now to the audio recording I realise that I provided a very limited description of what I was proposing to do and it was therefore not surprising that when I called for volunteers to play the different roles I ended up having to conscript two of the characters.

We pushed our chairs back and opened up a small stage area. It took a while for the actors to move into role and begin, tentatively, to live the story. They were stiff and hesitant, partly because there hadn't been enough time to enter the story. This was my first time at working "live" with improvisational drama as a research method and there was a lot for me to learn about my facilitation of the process but it proved to be a good humoured activity and as we returned our chairs to a circle at the end it led to some interesting reflections. The academic Dean was the first to comment, having been reminded that when Susan first applied to do this research there was a strong view expressed in the Admissions Committee that she was too close to the topic. He went on to suggest, "In writing up her research doing what you have done would help her distance herself as she sees others make sense of the experience."

Several others picked up on the way Susan had written from within the story but that this activity had helped her become an outside witness. One faculty member who had not been involved in the earlier discussion was reminded of a recent



incident where, for the first time he had told the traumatic story of when he was a young boy and his father had left the family in Hong Kong to find work in the UK. It was, for him, a case of "learning in the telling." Simon, on the other hand, emailed the faculty after the seminar to suggest that it was not necessary to abandon "attachment theory" and that he had located a couple of academics in the discipline who might be added to the supervisor support team for Susan.

Such incidents are intense and unpredictable. Outcomes cannot be "set up" or contrived. Different people in the process move to different places through the process. It is important to acknowledge the "theory" that resides in these practices and is held in the narrative space of the story. There is a danger that, in isolating aspects of the experience for further discussion, they will lose their significance and energy as they are removed from the only place that gives them life. However, I will lift out some perspectives for further discussion, partly to bring these experiences into dialogue with a wider literature and to explore an alternative language with which to acknowledge and celebrate the experience.

Living my inquiry in the way I have described it has led me to value the learning space and work to enrich it. I am not just talking about the physical space, although in the case I have narrated I felt it was important to re-locate the seminar to an environment that would permit more holistic participation. And the change of place was a deliberate attempt at dis-locating and therefore dis-orienting the participants. But the most important aspect of the learning space is in the quality of interaction that it enables. This is what Torbert calls a "liberating structure" (Torbert 1991), a generative social environment in which intense dialogue can lead to knowledge creation. The features of a liberating structure include "a theory of power, a practice of management, and a method of inquiry" (Torbert 1991, 6). This applies whether the setting is business, government or education (ibid, 99).

## A Blind Spot

A lot of my work has been with students from cultures other than European who exhibit a natural affinity for social learning environments. In most non-western contexts everyone in the community is both a teacher and a learner and the learning experience is interdependent, not independent (Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner 2007). One of my responsibilities, for several years, was to coordinate a Research Induction School, a six week course designed for beginning research students held twice a year in March and September. In September 2007, for example, we had ten students from eight different countries. Looking back on my journal entries from this period I noted that the group began to bond by the end of the second week and in week five I wrote, "It is... encouraging to see how the group has bonded - it was clear from the interaction in the seminars this morning that they are not only aware of, but genuinely interested in each others work, and are able to contribute quality advice and perceptive comment." This sometimes provided fruitful learning experiences. On one occasion, early in my work with communication students, a Russian student had been helping a Lebanese sort out problems with a virus on her computer. This was mentioned in a class setting and led the group to develop of a model of reflective practice based on the experience which was subsequently shared with the wider community in a seminar on reflective learning.

Torbert (1991) includes the conscious use of all available forms of power to sustain a liberating structure, involving what he calls "a psycho-social jujitsu" (Torbert 1991, 103) that gives the participants more discretion and direction in the process than usual. This was slow to emerge in my practice, for reasons I intend to discuss in the following pages. Ideally a liberating structure provides a safe place in which participants can experience new things (as, for example, the possibilities of different ways of knowing through improvisational drama in the incident described above) and temporarily suspend judgement as they experiment with how this might relate to their prior knowledge. It has some similarities to the liminal experiences (Turner 1995) of initiates in traditional societies. What I was to learn

from my facilitation of Susan's seminar was how easily my interest in the subject conflicted with my responsibility to manage the inquiring space with the consequence that I interrupted, and subsequently silenced Simon.

There is no single way of representing experience. To explore the significance of this I will re-reproduce here a section of the seminar interaction recorded above before discussing it further. I had just highlighted the way in which Susan had noticed things in her narrative that were not apparent in the raw data and she responded:

Susan: "It was so surprising ..."

I invited her to say more about this but Simon was not satisfied with the discussion.

Simon: "Narrative is too large an entity to analyse as a whole. I guess it's the components that are analysed and not the narrative itself."

I interrupted him, "Ah, you can break down a narrative into its parts, but that is not narrative analysis. Narrative analysis is ..." Simon had not finished and I felt that he was trying to avoid eye contact with me. "What do you do," he continued, "with components such as the patterns she recognises ... there are elements in each narrative that need to be isolated from each other."

Susan: "It won't be just one story - and I am looking for movement, going back and forth. If I analyse it in its components I won't see this process."

Simon: "That's where my problem is."

Dave: "But you are thinking paradigmatically and she is thinking diachronically." The distinction had come out in Paula and Susan's discussion about Bruner and I now used it to drive home an epistemological nail. ...

As I re-listen to the audio recording of this exchange I can hear Susan's and Simon's voice in the background while I am speaking but I cannot tell what they are saying and ignored them in the first transcription. But their voices are important to "what is going on when what is going on is going on." Rather than maintaining a shared space my intervention had divided it. I notice from the recording that my voice changed slightly as if I am leaning into the discussion in a more aggressive way and I laugh nervously at the end of my comment as if pleased that I have made my point. I notice this was transferred into my commentary to accompany the transcript when I used the phrase "to drive home an epistemological nail" as if I felt the need, or was in a position to claim the authority, to bring closure to the discussion. I was very interested, in fact passionate, about what Susan was trying to do and I declared my interests at the beginning of the seminar but this was in danger of compromising my facilitation. Duplicity of motive and confusion about my role led to a polarisation in the discussion. For a moment, and for some, I sensed that the learning space collapsed and the interaction became inauthentic. It is too easy for me to dismiss the moment as I did in the first account as a sense that "Simon was not satisfied." I had stumbled in my responsibility to use the power in the room in liberating ways.

There was something missing from my facilitation practice in the first couple of years of my inquiry. Something that I was unaware of and that didn't seem to matter in my years of didactic teaching. Something that was struggling to express itself in my practice as I began my journey into action inquiry but resisted. With the benefit of greater distance from this incident, for example, I can see that while action inquiry remained for me a practical and mental exercise - answering such reflective questions as, "how can I act differently?" and "how can I think differently?" - I had little awareness of and therefore influence over my own presence in the situation. The "I" in those questions was being ignored and I was behaving as if anyone in that situation, with the knowledge I had, would think and act in the same way. Yet, it was as if another "me" had arrived in the room and usurped the power that came with my role as facilitator in order to make a point and, in doing so, undermined my efforts at sustaining a generative learning space.

This blind spot in my practice meant that I was ignoring important information in the experience. I mentioned, for example, my anxiety when I introduced improvisational drama as an inquiry tool but, again, this may have been an interpretation introduced at the storytelling stage. There is no evidence that I was conscious of it in-the-moment in a way that might have influenced my action and improved the learning experience for the participants. With hindsight I can agree with Hanne Heen (2005) when she admits that she thinks too much rather than too little. The breakthrough - although it was gradual not sudden - came as I found myself faced with, rather than fleeing from, discomfort and embarrassment.

## **Making Sense in Embarrassment**

In the autumn of 2006 the faculty was joined by a new member from Asia. She had recently completed a PhD in Missiology at an evangelical theological seminary in the United States. In January she offered a faculty seminar on “contextualisation” (a topic in missiology that attempts to understand the process involved in relating the universals of Christian doctrine to cultural context). In my experience, American evangelicals have developed a highly functional approach to the question and I, and it turned out several others, approached the seminar in the hope that the discussion might bring some critical rigour to the topic. I was a few minutes late arriving at the seminar and noticed as I entered the room that there were two seats vacant, one next to her and the other on the opposite side of the table. I chose to sit opposite her. As I have observed before our physical positions may have enhanced the confrontational tone of our interactions.

During the seminar I was conscious of monitoring my behaviour (choosing when I spoke and when I remained silent) but was not conscious of a meta-reflection on the territories of experience or intervention tactics (parts of speech) proposed by Torbert (2004). My journal reflections following the seminar focus on my intervention style. I questioned the quality of my listening, admitting that I had heard her comments through the ideological frame of the seminary in which she

studied. I asked myself in what ways I had shown respect (witnessing) and was only able to recall one instance when I intentionally tried to witness what I heard her saying, reflecting, as I wrote in my journal that “it could have been helpful to have more intentionally located myself in her argument and worked from that perspective. Instead I (and others) were located in another hermeneutical space trying to bring her over.” When I asked myself whether we were working to similar outcomes I concluded in my journal,

“perhaps her goals were more modest than ours - she wanted to explore the topic of contextualisation and probably hoped for a positive experience in her inaugural presentation to the community. Unfortunately I, and several others on the staff, were concerned with what we judged the theological naivety of the approach and responded accordingly.”

I had given no attention to framing a common purpose to the discussion or attempting to work within her frame. Despite her Asian background and gender I received a quite blunt email from her after the seminar which expressed, in slightly hesitant English, her disappointment:

“I am a bit uncomfortable with your being negative about Evangelical and its education. I may further uncomfortable to work with someone who has that sort of antagonistic feeling toward it. Am I misunderstanding you? If so, you correct me.”

She sought out an opportunity to discuss this with me the next day. The conversation began with details of the seminar discussion she had found confusing. This time I was conscious of rehearsing Torbert’s parts of speech, even at one point hesitating quite noticeably while I tried to shift my response from advocacy to illustration. I found the conversation quite difficult, although not unfriendly.

I did not realise how her characterisation of my position as antagonistic to evangelicals had affected me until the following day when I gathered with other

members of my CARPP supervision group in Bath. There had been changes in the membership of the group following the MPhil transfer process. As we offered suggestions of how we might use the time together I suggested, with this incident fresh in my mind, that I would find it helpful if we could share our experiences of reflection-in-action.

I began by saying how difficult I found it to decide, in the moment, how to respond using Torbert's model of the parts of speech, referring to the conversation I had had the day before. Geoff, our supervisor, asked me to say what happened and I resisted his request. "We can't help you if you don't give us some data" he said. It was as if my mind went blank and I had difficulty recalling the details. I felt uncomfortable. I began to sweat and wanted to leave the room. But Geoff was too kind and too persistent to let me off the hook, saying that he noticed that I often used the word "feeling" but that I had never described it, "there are no adjectives or adverbs attached to the word, he observed" as he pushed me to say what I was feeling at that moment. There was silence while I pondered the question. I felt supported by the group and my desire to flee drifted away but all I could say to break the silence was, "I feel relaxed." "Relaxed" was a poor label to describe how I felt but I was struggling to get in touch with my emotions and lacked the vocabulary with which to describe them.

Geoff's challenge and the experience lingered with me. Why did this incident have so much emotional energy? What did I mean when I talked or wrote about "feeling"? What would happen if I allowed my feelings to inform my practice, if I gave attention to a more embodied experience?

The split between body and mind, rationality and feeling is deeply embedded in western thought and practice. Emotions have been blamed for disturbing the clarity of the mind. Criticism of this position exists in many forms and disciplines. Perhaps most surprising is the result of recent work in cognitive neuroscience. In discussing emerging understandings of human consciousness, for example, Antonio Damasio (1992 in Bulkeley 2005) rejects the mind-body dualism of Rene

Descartes, arguing that feelings and sensations are products of the neural workings of the brain. Emotions and feelings are the way in which earlier experience and learning are accessed in-the-moment. It is no longer possible to separate the rational soul from the physical body (Bulkeley 2005). As a result Western assertions of reason over emotion (that I suspect unconsciously permitted me to marginalise or ignore embodied information) are false. Bulkeley summarises Damasio's argument by saying, "reason cannot function in a normal, healthy fashion without the active and continuous input of emotional information" (Bulkeley 2005, 26). Damasio concludes, "Feelings form the base for what humans have described for millennia as the human soul or spirit." (quoted in Bulkeley 2005, 26).

Not long after this incident it was as if my body wanted to test whether I had got the message. I felt an initial discomfort in my left big toe - irritating rather than disabling. The next day I felt a more pronounced yet more general ache in my left leg. I was now hobbling when I walked. That night the pain was intense, waking me abruptly at 3:30am. At first I thought it was the minor ache I sometimes feel when I get out of bed in the morning feeling a bit stiff - but this was different. I tried to stretch my leg but I couldn't - the pain was excruciating. I tried to turn over in the bed but lifting my left knee sent pain throughout my body. I tried pushing against the pain. At first it was a struggle but slowly the pain yielded and I was able to straighten my leg. I was exhausted and lay there, a thousand thoughts rushing through my mind.

I must have dozed off when a stab of pain woke me again. I had turned over and unconsciously bent my leg again. Once again I couldn't straighten it and the pain just kept throbbing away. Lying in the bed I tried to "carry" my foot on the top of the other across to the side of the bed - it worked but I was exhausted by the pain. I waited for it to calm down but it didn't.

Perhaps, I thought, if I hung it over the side of the bed it would get the blood flowing in the leg. At least it didn't make it worse...but I couldn't sleep like that. Perhaps it was a kind of cramp and I should try putting some weight on it. I swung



myself up to sit on the side of the bed placing some weight on my right foot. Slowly I tried to transfer the weight across but I had to remain seated. I tried different ways of putting weight on my left foot and eventually I was able to stand with my weight balanced between my right leg and a firm grip on the furniture.

I kept pushing more weight onto the left leg, pulling back again as it responded with screaming pain. But I kept trying and decided, although I still couldn't straighten it completely, to try and walk to the loo. Once in motion the leg straightened and I noticed that this was its most comfortable position. I must have looked miserable - hobbled over, arms stretched out to grab the sides of the corridor, dragging my foot along. Several times the weight would fall at a slightly different angle and my knee would let out a massive pain - I felt on several occasions as if it would collapse. I staggered back to the bedroom and fell into the chair where I sat down to write about the experience - overwhelmed by feelings of dread, fear of losing my mobility, my work...

I finally hobbled back to the bed where I fell into a deep sleep. The next morning the knee was still painful and very weak but I was able to dress and in a few hours it subsided, slowly returning to normal. The pain did not return.

I recall that CS Lewis (1940) wrote, "God whispers to us in our joys ... but shouts in our pain." Yes, I got the message. I need to give attention to my embodied senses. It is one thing to talk about feeling, it is another to actually feel, and to embrace feelings as valid knowledge that can inform action. What happens in my practice depends on my being fully involved - the whole person needs to be in the room. When I first began my action inquiry I found some difficulty in changing my formal academic writing style to include the personal pronoun. But that was a small step by comparison with this shift in my inquiry - attending to my feelings and bringing my whole self into the moment.

Discomfort or embarrassment has the same effect as ecstatic experience, or wonder, that Bulkeley says involves "a sudden *decentering* of the self ... one's

ordinary sense of personal identity is dramatically altered, leading to new knowledge and understanding that ultimately *recenter* the self" (Bulkeley 2005, 4, italics in the original). Until I learn to give attention to these emotions I am neither fully aware or adequately resourced to deliberate on my actions in-the-moment. I cannot be fully present. It is as if my unconscious self holds the sediments of past experience that shape my motives and desires, giving bodily expression to this accumulated knowledge in-the-moment through my emotions.

Numerous authors write of the importance of paying attention (Marshall 1999, Mason 2002, Scharmer 2007) but none illustrate it more graphically, for me, than Auggie Wren, the owner of a small cigar store in Brooklyn, in the film *Smoke*. For the past 14 years Auggie has taken a photograph every day from the street corner outside his store and the pictures are carefully filed in piles of photo albums. "People say you have to travel to see the world," Auggie says. "Sometimes I think that if you just stay in one place and keep your eyes open, you're going to see just about all that you can handle." One of his regular customers is Paul Benjamin, a writer who hasn't published anything since he wife was killed a few years earlier in the cross fire of two gunmen on the street. When he is shown the collection he comments that all the snapshots look alike. It's all a matter of slowing down, Auggie says, pointing out the differences: the seasons, the light, and the look on people's faces. "Slow down," Auggie tells Paul, "You'll never get it unless you slow down, my friend." Moments later Paul turns a page and sees a picture of his wife on the street corner and is overcome with emotion.

Slowing down is an important inquiry skill. Such holistic awareness can be healing for myself and for those with whom I am working. I described an incident in my teaching for the MPhil transfer paper that illustrates this process and I will re-visit the incident here to explore it further.

## Arriving in-the-moment

The beginning of 2005 was a very hectic period in my work. We enrolled a further seven students on the MA in Communication Practice in January 2005. It so happened that I had a busy consulting schedule during the first few months of the year and this required frequent changes in the course timetable. In addition we had re-structured the programme, postponing the contribution of adjunct faculty until later in the year, and it wasn't long before the administration started to hear complaints of "false advertising", referring to a promise on the website of an 'international faculty'. Someone in the group complained that they would have been treated better if they had been "customers". What was the benefit of being in the UK when they could do their reading anywhere? By the beginning of April I was finding fault with the casual way in which some of the group were treating the course. I was particularly annoyed when one student was absent without leave at the beginning of a new module on Persuasive Communication, only to walk in fifteen minutes before the end of the session and immediately start contributing at cross purposes to the discussion.

Once again I found myself in a 'performance period' (Eraut in Atkinson 2000) trying to give attention to my feelings and assumptions while managing the session and noticing that reflection-in-action (Schon 1983) can be a rather risky and even haphazard process. I was upset and recall that I was initially tempted to ask the student to leave. Although mildly disruptive it would have allowed us to stay on track for the rest of the session. Instead I invited him to explain his absence (apparently the result of urgent problems related to his accommodation) and then decided to use the last few minutes to have the group review the session. I spoke to the student afterwards to express my disappointment at his behaviour.

The group met a week later to discuss some readings I had given them but it soon became evident that no-one had read the material. I was frustrated and annoyed. "This isn't working guys, what is happening?" I asked. It quickly emerged that everyone was feeling de-motivated. Several criticisms surfaced. I admitted that

although I am normally an optimist, I was finding the group was dragging me down. As we talked about the situation several indicated that they didn't feel they could continue. I suggested that we could reflect on our experience of the course together, using a collaborative inquiry approach. We had, by this time, done quite a bit of personal journal work and were familiar with the action inquiry cycle.

It was agreed. But who should facilitate the process? There were concerns about the involvement of faculty, but this was countered by the observation that "they are part of the problem". It was eventually agreed that CP, a member of staff who had been facilitating the journal seminars, and I would participate and that we should jointly facilitate the process. It was also decided that the purpose was to inquire into the question, "How can we improve the motivation in our group?" I suggested that we ought to agree some ground rules. Although the first few came quickly, it took a further 20 minutes before a consensus emerged on the following:

- Confidentiality
- Don't joke with each other (this can be painful)
- Be appreciative of each other's differences
- Be patient with each other
- Don't be judgmental
- Be aware of the quiet people
- Be committed to action - to doing something about what we discover
- Be open/transparent - to speak from the self
- Be supportive
- No laptops

I asked and was given permission to record the discussion. Once again I will provide excerpts from a transcription of the conversation rather than narrate the incident in my own words. The transcription allows me to engage in a more phenomenological way with the experience. CP, the only other member of staff present, didn't speak in the exchanges that follow.

QM: "Are we ready to make this commitment? One of our negatives is that we haven't built a good relationship with each other."

SA: "Does that mean that you don't want to participate, or are you just saying this to prove you have been listening?"

MG: "We've already done some reflection but I don't know, now, where to break into the cycle."

SA: "Finding the problem is itself a process."

QM: "We're taking a long time to get started - I suggest that we start by people expressing where they are."

(silence)

QM: "OK, for me personally, there are things that have de-motivated me. There is not a lot of interaction in the group and not many of you are connecting online. This erodes the value of the course for me. Another thing that has weathered away my motivation are the frequent and abrupt changes in scheduling, making it difficult to have a life outside the course."

HF: "This study is transforming my life, but this transformation is really painful. Being alone without my family is hard. I am not good at starting relationships and spend most of my time in my room. I have reached a point where I want to stop, not continue. I need more guidance from the tutors, especially with essay writing."

(silence)

HP: "I can't say what it is. Being away from home isn't a problem. I don't contribute online, sometimes I'm hesitant or just lazy."

SA: "A few times I've been tempted to give up. My work place would be very happy if I give up. My main stress is from my job. I am working hard but am not appreciated. The aim of my study is to improve my work but when I am not appreciated or criticised for being here it is hard. I am not getting support from my organisation. I don't have time for reading - in the evening I have to choose between doing e-mail or reading."

DA (me): "Can I pick up on that....have you finished?"

SA: "Yes."

DA (me): "My name is Dave. What SA has just been saying reminds me that there are many times when I find a tension between my consultancy work and my work

here. Whether this is an underlying cause of some of the frustration that has been expressed, I don't know, but I haven't yet found that balance since September. I have faced challenges far greater than I anticipated that have demanded a lot - a lot - of my attention. I do feel as if I'm rushing to the next plane, chasing the next appointment. And this might have reflected on the way I have supported the learning process this year. We're not running a conveyor belt that is producing MA's. The nature of this course has a very human touch - a very real sense of engagement with people. If my professional life isn't in equilibrium I need to give attention to this. In the past six months I haven't found it but I continue to work on it.

(Pause)

... and actually as I say that, I'm conscious that there is an emotion there in what I am saying that I'm not able to articulate. I'm feeling something...you know....a little bit of....that is close to the surface.... I fell silent.

The silence lasted for almost two minutes.

HF was the first to speak. "I found it very helpful to express what I felt and to hear others do the same."

MG: "We've made a big step to be honest with one another. I appreciated the way those of you feeling pressure were able to trust the rest of us with your concerns. I need to be more aware."

Gently, the group began to suggest ways we could move forward.

HP: "We could help each other and hold each other accountable for assignments. I want to be more sensitive to your struggles."

In my initial writing of this incident there was a moment when I unconsciously moved away from transcription to talk *about* the experience. Immediately after SA's comments about her struggle between writing emails or reading I wrote in the first draft:

"I had been listening carefully and SA's comments triggered something in myself. I shared my frustration at the lack of balance of my professional life. For the past few months I had been too busy and I knew I wasn't serving my clients well. I was surprised by the emotion that came to the surface as I talked and felt tears just behind my eyes. I couldn't continue to speak. The room fell silent again but I felt it was no longer a "we don't know what to say" kind of silence but a supportive, inquiring kind of listening."

It is worth comparing this description with the transcription of what I said. While drawing from memory, rather than the transcript, in trying to describe why I couldn't continue to speak, I perceive a detachment - I am talking *about* the experience, not presenting it. I notice how easily, perhaps because of the emotion involved, I imposed a way of reading the experience on the raw data - the phenomenology - of the moment. This deprived me, and my reader, of a quality of awareness of the experience and the opportunity to give attention to the limits of the representation I was working with. I notice, for example, the way I interpret the silence and wonder what evidence I have for the claim that it provided "a supportive, inquiring kind of listening." While I had no problem acknowledging the emotion of the experience was I avoiding something else? As I listened again to the recording I decided to remove the paragraph and continue with a transcription.

Now my own words, and elements of my emotional state are available as data. As I listened to the recording I realised how long the silence had lasted (1 minute 43 seconds). All I can hear on the recording was my deeper breathing for the first half minute. But the silence went on and I began to wonder what was happening. I wondered what I was doing with my eyes. Where was I looking - at the table, individuals in the group, or the ceiling? Were others looking at me, to make sense of what I had just said or, possibly, for a facilitating intervention? I certainly didn't know where to go from here. At this moment, we were in autonomous mode (Heron 1999). I needed to be carried to the next place in the inquiry by the group. I can't remember where my eyes went and the audio recording doesn't tell me. I have reached the limits of data available through this level of representation.

The group met again a week later.

HP: "I really feel that I have been more conscious of others in the past week. By chance I ran into HF at KFC the other day and we walked back together."

HF: "This incident really made a difference. It helped me understand you (talking to HP). I also felt supported by MG. Although I didn't reply, I appreciated your emails."

MG: "I'm from a background that is outward focused. I realised that in this programme I have become focused on myself and that I had gone cold turkey on helping!"

SA: "We have a saying in my culture, 'Anytime you catch a fish, it's fresh.' I decided last week to start again...."

HP: "I feel a kind of excitement, something is happening. There is a new energy amongst us..."

HF: "I have the same feeling - there is something new...."

SA: "...we have the will. I made sacrifices to come on this course which is why I was unhappy about the way we were treated."

AT (who had, until this point been fairly quiet): "When I started this course I lost my job. I struggled with 'why did it happen?' Within 2 months I had found a new job and now I am paid to sit in the library! I am now 100% motivated!"

Some of these comments were already attempts at explaining the experience - making claims about the lack of motivation in the group. This process was made explicit by HF.

HF: "When we started this inquiry I made the assumption that our frustration was because of the way the course was organised. But I now realise that what we assumed to be the real problem wasn't the real problem."

SA: "I agree - when we were complaining about the course it wasn't just about the course - I now realise that in British culture people don't really care who you are. I was under lots of other pressures. This course is not just about my studies, it's about my life. There is no-where I can scream."



MG: "I felt at the beginning that others .... were demotivated and this dragged me down."

AT: "I feel very supported right now. It's like concentrated juice."

HF: "For me there is more for me to do .... I need to take more initiative."

AS: "We've already taken the biggest step - we feel secure enough to tell each other our situation."

SA: "with students from overseas, I suggest a day out - it would help if we spent more time together..."

MG: "perhaps we can hire a boat and have a picnic up the river?"

In the middle of May, a few weeks after the inquiry, I received an email from one of the group saying, "Dave, Just a quick note to say thanks for a great week of lectures. It's been long days but worth the effort." Everyone involved had a different take away from the process as their comments illustrate. And yet the confrontation and inquiry had allowed everyone to bring more of themselves into the process and had moved the group forward. No one quit the programme.

## **The Reflective Process**

In several of these incidents I had experienced what Graves (1997) calls "grace", an unexpected and subtle shift in the quality of the moment that has the potential to transform and heal. This is not something that can be planned but "comes in by the back door ... While the attention is elsewhere, grace is at work in the unconscious" (Graves 1997, 16). Knowing comes as an "epiphany", an "aha moment" when "the penny drops." A pre-requisite seems to be an ability to suspend ego involvement and attend to emotional and embodied sources of knowledge. This shifts the ground of knowing from a cognitive and rational base to a more visceral awareness of the influence of personal history and the presence of power. This is not commonplace in the literature on reflective practice. "Any number of texts" writes Brookfield (1991), "emphasize the importance of reflecting critically on the assumptions underlying practice and there is plenty of advice on

methods that can be used to this end. But the stream of writing on reflective practice tends to appeal at the cerebral, rather than the visceral level" (Brookfield 1991, 23).

The metaphor contained in the notion of "reflection" may not be helpful. A mirror reflection is an image of what is directly in front of it. It suggests an external object perceived and projected back in the direction from which it came. This has, as Bolton (2005) points out, dualist overtones, "*this* in dialogue with *that*, *in* and *out*, *here* and *there*" (Bolton 2005, 4). Torbert's (2004) loops can be handled cognitively as ways of thinking about what is happening "out there." Critical incidents (Ghaye and Lillyman (1997), Fish and Coles (1998)) can be analysed in a detached way. In an online discussion open to researchers associated with the Centre I made this comment in March 2009:

"Reflective Practice and Action Inquiry can often be done in a detached way - that is, seeing the observable world as "out there", and missing the important question of what is happening in the knowing self. While the pragmatic value of reflective practice is unquestioned we may miss the opportunity to know in a deeper embodied way."

Making sense of a situation involves reflection on its antecedents and the influences of my interpretive frame (assumptions and beliefs) on the quality and focus of attention I bring to it. I can take this process apart through further levels of cognitive attention in a spiral that involves thinking all the way down. As a mental activity my mind skillfully makes short circuits across the available data, labelling the experience in "meaningful" ways and jumping to conclusions that lead to action. But without attention to the quality of presence in-the-moment accessible through emotional awareness and embodied knowledge I may be unaware of the complex motives and desires that give it direction.

The following discussion involves several cycles of reflection on an incident that occurred early in my inquiry through which I have witnessed an awakening, not just

to the way in which I initially jumped to conclusions and then began to probe my assumptions, but also began to explore the call for presence in my practice. The account begins with excerpts from my journal, written in the first hours after the incident in which I offer a description of what happened, overlayed with my early sense making. This is followed by a cycle of reflection as I worked with the incident in a paper written for supervision, and then a further reflective cycle as I re-visited the experience in preparation for the Diploma transfer. A fourth level of reflection brings this into my current writing.

Throughout the Master's programme we encouraged the use of personal learning journals and organised a weekly journal review seminar, providing students an opportunity to share something from their journals with the rest of the group. While we respected the privacy of their journal writing there was an understanding that they would bring something to the seminar they could share. These sessions were often rich and rewarding occasions, stimulating helpful conversations on a wide range of topics.

On one occasion I interacted with a Korean student who had made a number of unquestioned claims about American influence on his culture. I wrote in my journal:

"My conscious intention had not been to confront this student but to make the more general point that our conclusions often say more about our assumptions than they do about the facts. Phrases like "the reason is..." or even the word "because" may hint at claims that need to be tested. These phrases in the Korean students' journal entry had provoked my intervention."

In my journal reflections I wondered whether I had said too much and whether I had intervened at the right moment. I wrote:

"It had been a good humoured exchange but I was a little uncomfortable that I had dominated the discussion in what is normally a student led session."

But I went on to say, "I had been tempted to engage in the debate earlier. By holding back and letting the group probe their own attitudes I was able to use the incident to illustrate an aspect of reflective practice."

This intervention was part of a discussion resulting from another student's journal reflection on "tele-evangelists". Many of the students who join the programme find their first few weeks in the UK quite disorienting. One expressed it as "not finding anything in the media in England that they could identify with." This student was surprised to see some of the same evangelical shows on British satellite that she had seen in Kenya - and was horrified. She had found The God Channel on the television in their student common room. She criticised the format ("preaching without editing") and the content ("so loaded with Christian jargon"), concluding, "It really pains me when I see it."

As I worked with this experience in writing a paper for supervision a month later I observed:

"Many of the students on our programme are Christians, and some work for the church, so this form of evangelical globalisation usually comes up at some time during the year. But on this occasion I found myself uncertain about whether to contribute to the discussion. I have my own opinions and, I reasoned to myself, this could be a useful learning experience for the group. But I remained silent. Others added their voices from Nigeria, Uganda and India. As they gave examples from their different situations I felt my own outrage at this travesty of Christianity, but also found myself involved in a collegial rather than personal protest. By my choosing a strategy of silence, the group had developed a solidarity in their criticisms, so that by the time the Korean made his complaint about American influence on his culture, it was possible to make the more general comment about the reflective practice of testing our assumptions. Palmer (1998) talks about creating a paradoxical space that invites the voice of the individual and the voice of the

group. We had experienced this paradox and perhaps, as a result, the students had moved closer to becoming "the authors of their own practice".

Several months later, as I prepared my Diploma paper, I returned to this experience. This is what I then wrote:

"I imply that my "strategy of silence" was intentional when, as I now reflect from a distance I suspect this was not the case. Elsewhere in the paper I admit, "I feel vulnerable and uncertain in the strategies I use..." I am embarrassed to read, "I just caught myself...by holding back and letting the group probe their own attitudes I was able *to use* the incident to illustrate an aspect of reflective practice" (italics for emphasis). Was I really as intentional in my action as this implies? I was focussed on making a point and it is likely that this undermined the possibility of a generative outcome.

"I refer in the supervision paper to Parker Palmer's idea that in teaching we sometimes experience a "paradoxical space that invites the voice of the individual and the voice of the group" (Palmer 1998) - something I now see as immensely valuable and fragile - and then, almost arrogantly, go on to claim, "we had experienced this paradox and, as a result, the students had moved closer to becoming "the authors of their own practice." How did I know this? How could I have known this? In summarising my conclusions from the incident later in the paper I implied access to similar knowledge, when I claimed, "...by initially choosing to listen I had unexpectedly created the space for collaborative learning and gained the permission to ask the more challenging questions." Really? Again, how could I have probed these assumptions?

"I read these comments now, with embarrassment. In the same paper I acknowledge that in the "performance period" of the classroom (Eraut in Atkinson 2000) I must trust myself. Reading back through my record of this incident I don't know whether I can. I am aware, as I also state in the paper,

that the values that shape my practice are "largely tacit". But what has hit me between the eyes as a result of revisiting this incident in my memory and through my presentation of it last March is the way my agenda - what I wanted to accomplish - distorted my interpretation of the incident. I can now see the incongruity and contradiction, in this tacit zone, between my espoused values and the attitudes I conveyed through my interventions in the discussion."

I continued in the paper:

"But perhaps the most disturbing conclusion is the recognition that under the surface I do not hold a simple set of transparently wholesome beliefs. The self that acted in this way is a "living contradiction" (Whitehead 1989) exhibiting conflicting ideas and incompatible values, some more selfish than others. Making changes in the quality of my practice isn't simply a matter of aligning an existing set of values with action. This reflection suggests there is work to do at deeper levels of my being to resolve these conflicting values. So, at least on occasions, when my actions do not reflect my espoused values I find myself echoing St Paul, "I do not understand my actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate....For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out" (Romans 7:15, 18). This is a kind of knowing which touches the inner core of my being and suggests a deeper journey that I need to take, inspired, perhaps by Kierkegaard's understanding that "purity of heart is to will one thing" (Kierkegaard [1938] 1956)."

## **Beyond Reflective Practice**

As I write now, looking back on this incident and my reflections I can see further evidence of my absence. When referring to my concern about whether I had dominated the discussion I said that I was "a little uncomfortable?" The adjective "little" isn't very helpful in exploring the discomfort. Emotional and embodied data

was weak or missing from my deliberation. It is interesting that at this stage of my inquiry I recognised a spiritual dimension to my inquiring practice and used the language of my religious tradition to express it. I would now say that on these occasions I am witnessing the symptoms of the soul (Moore 1992), which if honoured can move me towards authenticity and presence. "Observing what the soul is doing and hearing what it is saying is a way of "going with the symptom" (1992, 7), often expressed in "the latest addiction, a striking dream, or a troubling mood" (ibid, 5). If we retain the language of reflection in action inquiry, then we must give attention to the reflective surface. While the metaphor of a mirror is powerful it is not a simple mirror. On closer inspection the reflective surface turns out to be the "living contradiction" that is my-self. Whatever is the focus of my attention will be blurred by the conflicting motives and passions of the moment. As WH Auden says, "How warped the mirrors where our worlds are made" (Auden [1940] 2007).

So while the disciplines of action inquiry can inform my deliberation in significant ways they are deficient if only employed at the cognitive level. Thomas Merton (1973) describes the "arrogant gaze of our investigating mind," which seeks to capture God and "secure permanent possession of him in an act of knowing that has power over him" (1973, 103), an insight that can be applied to anything that occupies our gaze. The visual references are not incidental. Sight situates me in my world - I am at its centre - it is perceived from my point of view (notice the visual connotation). Attending to the "me" that does the perceiving is an essential dimension of knowing in-the-moment that is accessed through my feelings - the visceral awareness that accompanies my participation in the world.

In discussing the affective mode of the psyche, John Heron makes a distinction between emotions and feeling (Heron 1992). I may experience joy, sadness or anger, what Damasio (1999) calls the primary emotions, or their cultural elaborated extensions (such as guilt or jealousy) in ways that may affect my motivational state. But these powerful influences on my action in the world are distinct from the quality of consciousness Heron describes with the word *feeling*, which he defines as

“resonance with being” (Heron 1992, 92). This “participative feeling...is the absolute hallmark of personhood, not reason” (ibid, 94). Referring to Hochschild (1990) Heen says, “I see feelings as a sense, which, like other senses, conveys information to the self. Our feelings tell us about our relationship to what is going on in the world and how we stand in relation to that” (Heen 2005, 266). So, as I give attention to my feelings and emotions, I become aware of how I relate to what I see, hear and touch. This awareness of self doesn’t come through the five senses. It is an embodied knowing that has become a critical element in my inquiry offering signals not just to “what is going on?” but to “what is my relationship to what is going on?”

The first movement of my inquiry is almost complete. In both Hebrew and Latin the word for wisdom is derived from taste. It is something to be experienced not theorised about. As I nurtured my inquiring skills in this period of my research it became clear that I needed to attend to visceral as well as cognitive data in order to access the symptoms of a fulfilled or frustrated desire to be in harmony with my world. Such resonance is a characteristic of soulful living, of a deep and satisfying presence.

This chapter has not been a neat and tidy description and analysis of my emerging practice of inquiry. What you have are glimpses of the fits and starts, the disappointments and joys of the process. Action Inquiry skills are not acquired as one does the ability to ride a bicycle, or even to drive a car. It is not appropriate to licence a driver as an “inquiring practitioner” after a few short lessons. Action Inquiry is more like learning a foreign language. My first attempts at French were faltering and I failed my French language O-Level exam. But this didn’t deter me from taking a job, on graduation, in France, or from later struggling to read Camus in the original. I am still on the lower slopes of proficiency in Action Inquiry but as I gained experience the process began to influence my practice.





## Chapter Four

### **The Shortest Distance between Two Points is a Zigzag Line**

*It is the Hebraic intuition that God is capable of all speech  
acts except that of monologue, which has generated our  
acts of reply, of questioning and counter-creation*

George Steiner 1989

*When we know something, we come into relationship with it.  
All our knowing is an attempt to transfigure the unknown  
- to complete the journey from anonymity to intimacy*

John O'Donahue 1999

The previous chapter explored my growing awareness of the importance of not just knowing “what is going on when what is going on is going on” but of giving attention to my emotions and feelings to understand my relationship to what is going on. The aim of this chapter is to explore an emerging appreciation for relational knowing and the ways in which this has influenced my management practice. I enter this next cycle of learning recognising the hesitant and often inadequate ways in which I participate in the social world. I will describe my attempts at relational inquiry, creating space for the “other”, and explain how, through several incidents, I faced the challenge of becoming part of a system that is larger than myself, formed in-the-moment by connecting and interacting with others to experience what Martin Buber (1970) called the “space between.” I will conjecture that despite the fragile nature of this space it is formed and sustained by reverence, an awe for what lies outside my control. In the language I learned from my sojourn in Africa, “I am a person through people.” Or, to use the image offered

by Mary Catherine Bateson (2004) in describing Gregory Bateson's perspective on love, mind and wisdom, this is "a new animation of the landscape of awareness" (Bateson 2004, 38) that can transform our knowing and acting. In the taxonomy of relational research methodologies proposed by Bradbury and Lichtenstein (2000) this chapter is located in the intrapersonal sectors of their matrix.

One day in the autumn of 2005 I was walking with a colleague through the streets of Islington, deep in conversation about a particular issue in our work. Quite suddenly he stopped and, turning to me, asked "have you ever sailed a dinghy?" Taken instantly back to my youth I replied, "yes, many years ago, but I always preferred to row." "Ah," he responded, "as I thought, you are at heart a rationalist!" I laughed a little at the connection but he had a point. Through most of my professional life I have assumed the best way to make things happen was in straight lines, even if it meant travelling with my back to the destination using my own strength to get there. I was comfortable in my rowing boat.

We had been talking about one of my responsibilities at the Centre. Over the summer of 2005 I had become more involved in the life of the Centre and aware of difficulties in the management of another of the programmes, the MA in Development Practice that attracted practitioners involved in economic and social development from around the world. The programme administrator had resigned in July and it had become clear that a number of issues had been badly neglected. Someone had been appointed to take over the administration but was struggling to pull it back together before the next cohort started in September. The problems in the programme came up in an informal conversation over lunch with the Academic Dean in early September and, in a rather casual way, I offered to help. A week later he formally invited me to become co-director of the programme alongside the programme founder, a well known and respected academic in the field. I wasn't sure that I wanted the additional responsibility, but the work would fill out my portfolio through the winter months and I needed the income.

I agreed to the assignment, knowing that the programme was very traditional and employed didactic teaching methods (the Freirian banking concept of education (Freire 1970)). A colleague had withdrawn from teaching on the programme the year before because of differences in approach and practice. I anticipated some friction but decided that it would be a valuable experience in the light of our future plans for re-structuring the MA programmes at the Centre.

My first task was to bring some discipline into the marking of student work. The September Exam Board meeting had been postponed to November, against the wishes of the University, because the internal marking had not been completed. I discovered that very little student work had been marked since the previous December. Student papers were gathering dust on several faculty desks. With the agreement of the other co-director I convened a meeting of faculty and presented them with a report of the outstanding marking required. We re-distributed the marking load and set clear deadlines for completion. Although several missed the first deadline, we re-adjusted the load a second time and completed the marking just five days before the new date for the Exam Board, satisfying both the students and the University.

A week after I took responsibility in the programme we were presented with a formal letter of complaint by a new student who joined the programme in September, listing 7 areas of concern and copied to the Academic Dean, the Executive Director and all his sponsors. The complaints were not new to me. I had met with the students the Friday before and had been told about these concerns. I had asked the students to give me a week to investigate the problems and promised to meet them again the following Friday to report back. The letter was received on the Wednesday, two days before I was due to report back to the students.

I contacted the student and asked him to come and see me. I confirmed that there was nothing in his letter that he (and others) had not mentioned to me the Friday before and that he understood that I had agreed to report back on the situation the

following Friday. Under these circumstances I informed him that I considered his letter to be out of order and advised him to withdraw it until I had reported on my investigations. He refused to do so.

As a result the Programme Committee felt that it had no alternative than to reply to the letter in detail, pointing out the procedural error and giving a formal response to the issues he had raised. I drafted and sent the letter. A week later he asked to meet me again, this time with what he called his "counsellor". When the time of the meeting came I discovered that the student had no intention of attending and had sent this person to represent him. Apparently, although the student appreciated that his concerns were being addressed, he wanted to put on record the disappointment and frustration he had experienced in the first few weeks of the programme. He was experiencing symptoms the doctor had said were the result of stress.

I have deliberately offered this account of the situation in the language of a report to illustrate the directive style I adopted in managing it. I took over at a critical time in the programme and, I would argue, it needed leadership from the front. I have been comfortable, historically, in this kind of role. I am quick to size up a situation and decide on a course of action. In this situation there was little time for offline reflection. But as I now read the report I notice several things. Firstly, it contains little personal content. Although the pronouns "I", "my" and "me" occur frequently there is no attempt to convey who the "I" is, or what the "I" was sensing or feeling. Although I was engaged, addressing the issues and navigating around the sensitivities I faced, my behaviour was intuitive. I would have been unable to explain my actions in-the-moment.

There are other clues to my management approach to the situation. I needed to "bring some discipline" to the marking process and so "convened a meeting" to "redistribute the load and set clear deadlines." In responding to the student who had lodged his complaints I "informed him that his letter was out of order and advised him to withdraw it" and hid behind the Programme Committee who "had

no alternative than to respond in detail" to his letter. I am aware that my language is the language of certainty, precision, closure. My management style was to take control, to impose on the situation a way of thinking about it (strategic and tactical) that would lead to particular outcomes. The fact that these outcomes were positive (leading to a successful Exam Board and, later, the satisfactory resolution of the student's grievances) does not justify the means. It exhibits the action-logics of the Expert (Cook-Greuter 2002, Torbert 2004), particularly in the way in which I treated the other participants as objects - people and assessment papers alike were moved around to achieve the desired outcome. This kind of management practice did little to change the habits of faculty who get no pleasure out of marking papers and look for every excuse to postpone the task. Job done, programme culture unchanged.

There were times on Brendan's journey when neither the sails nor the oars were much help. When they were becalmed in a fog Brendan wisely advised his colleagues to pull in the oars since they had no idea in what direction they were going. And in the many storms they experienced it was too dangerous to hoist the sail or work the oars. Knowing when and how to act is a vital skill in organisational management.

## **To Mentor or Not to Mentor?**

Connelly and Clandinin (1999) offer a useful metaphor to describe the culture I encountered in the Development programme. Although in some ways I describe it as dysfunctional, its participants had crafted a story to live by that was quite different from my own. There were unquestioned sacred stories that conveyed status on its faculty and gave the curriculum the status of sacred text. The institution, at the time, had permitted a strong sense of territorial identity to emerge for this and other programmes. Each existed in its own silo with its own culture, something the Academic Dean had tried to address with only limited success. I had experienced and, at times, defended this practice in the

Communications programme. Over the first few years the team responsible for the programme had helped me develop a student-centred culture in the programme which was cherished. Unconsciously, we had carefully protected this space, particularly monitoring its borders. While the programme was institutionally established, the "classroom space" was crafted by its participants and, in different ways, each of us helped protect and nurture it.

I was shortly to enter another organisational territory with responsibility for the pre-registration stage of the PhD programme validated by the University of Wales. This stage exists to provide support for research students in drafting their research proposal and recruiting a supervision team. I had no previous experience with the programme although I was aware that the territory involved a careful balance of established research positions in which contested views lay hidden behind a practice that assigned incoming students to mentors before they arrived, allowing each faculty member to handle the induction of new students in their own way. Inevitably there had been numerous cases of inappropriate appointments and consequent frustrations and delays in helping the students define their research interests and methodology.

A year earlier, in an attempt to moderate this culture, the Dean had introduced a formal Research Induction School (RIS) to provide incoming students with a shared introduction to research methods. In the first year the programme, organised by another member of faculty, simply distributed the timetable between different members of staff with no attention to shared learning goals or coordination of topics. In previous years I had contributed briefly to these events with a couple of sessions on Action Research. When I took over responsibility for the pre-registration stage, the RIS became part of my brief. My first decision was to postpone the assignment of mentors to the end of the induction process. I set up a simple procedure to enable every student to meet informally with at least three faculty members of their choice to discuss their research interest so that, by the end of the RIS, students and staff were able to make an informed decision about

the mentoring relationships. Otherwise I let the Autumn programme run to its established pattern and focused my attention on the Spring School.

The faculty team involved in the RIS included an Indian, Hong Kong Chinese, Korean and 3 British ranging in age from their mid 40's to early 60's. There were two women. They represented a wide variety of specialisms - religious studies, anthropology, philosophy, communications, historical studies and theology. I was the only one with some experience of action research. By the middle of February I had met with each of them individually to solicit their views on the induction process and I felt it would be helpful to bring them together to discuss the shape of the programme.

I had been feeling anxious about the meeting for several days. I lost the last hour before the meeting (which I had intended for preparation) to a series of unrelated interruptions from staff and students and in the last five minutes banged out an agenda. There was no time for a last minute consideration of how to introduce the items or the order in which they were to be addressed. As it happened we were late starting and after about 10 minutes of waiting we decided to go ahead, although one member had still not arrived. This is not un-typical. It is virtually impossible to start a meeting with him present. He will wait until the meeting has started then go to the kitchen to boil a kettle and make a cup of tea. He eventually arrives at the meeting, papers, tea pot and cup precariously held in one hand while he opens the door with the other.

On this occasion, just as I was concluding a brief introduction to the purpose of the meeting, he turned up, not with his usual cup of tea but with the legs of a table in his hands. He hesitated as he opened the door, as if he had not realised that we were meeting in that particular room, and then explained that he wanted to take the table out to his car parked outside (the room opens onto the street and is a convenient short cut, avoiding the inconvenience of carrying things through the normal entrance on the other side of the building). We all got up to help him take the bits of the table across the room and to his waiting car. I recall my feelings,



half-hoping he was going to drive off to take the table home and let us get on with the business without him but no, five minutes later, tea pot and cup in his hands he walked into the room and sat down.

I was not my normal confident self in introducing the meeting and after a few preliminary comments I suggested, in a rather vague way, that we began by discussing the feedback we had received from the previous cohort. Others were hesitant to comment and when one did, I rather abruptly cut him off. I had not started well. I apologised and invited him to continue. I felt uncomfortable. The person I had interrupted is usually very supportive. While the next few comments were being made I was struggling with my feelings. I knew I couldn't 'think' my anxiety away. I wanted to trust the process and the people involved and I began to realise that I had no alternative.

"Rather than assigning a personal mentor at the end of the six week period," one of the staff was saying, "my suggestion would be to find someone as early as possible. This will give each student the opportunity to begin thinking about their research with their mentor." I hesitated before responding. This was a direct challenge to my decision in September to postpone the appointment to overcome problems in mismatching student and mentor. The feedback from the students in the previous RIS had been very positive about the opportunity they had to consult with different members of the staff before being assigned a mentor. "But we could fast forward this," he suggested. "You don't normally get that much exposure to staff in a normal university department", added another, "they were spoiled. I spent time with them but it was done at the expense of my half yearly reports. I don't have the time for this." My decision to postpone the appointment of mentors was the first topic of discussion. This was not what I had intended should happen in the meeting.

I realised that I had a choice. I could hold my ground, insisting on postponing the assignment of mentors on the grounds that it clearly gave the students a better experience. I thought of the value of witnessing - offering back to the group what I

was hearing in an affirming way - and decided to encourage the group to explore the suggestion of fast forwarding the appointment. Another voice was added in support of an early decision, suggesting that students need to be pushed to focus their interests and a personal mentor can hold them accountable. I picked up on this comment and suggested that the members of the group could support one another in this way. We had experienced strong bonding in the Autumn cohort and I had been encouraged by the way in which the students had become quite deeply involved in each others research interest.

By this time different perspectives had been brought into the conversation and I decided to let them lie there for the moment rather than seek closure. I wanted to explore the pedagogy of the RIS experience and invited the group to discuss it. Most of the sessions in the previous induction schools had been delivered as lectures and I wanted us to explore other learning approaches. "What experiences can we offer the students that will lead to learning? Not just provide a hand out on our topic." The conversation focussed quite quickly on writing. "They are asked to write something every week but what do they do in the seminars? They come with an outline or a powerpoint - one even gave us a mind-map."

"This throws up serious questions to admissions," someone suggested, "when we have people that are set in that way ... some catch up but there are some who never do. I don't think you can operate when students aspire to a PhD without basic skills in reading and writing." The Admissions tutor felt the criticism and protested, "the standard of admission into this programme is higher than the university itself," he said defensively.

"But Dave," the first person continued, "how much effect does a defective entry have in terms of the group dynamics, if it sets the pace that the group can move?" I noticed the inclusion of my name in the comment - perhaps a relational move - and offered a supportive "mmm" in response. "I get the impression that we are very much sailing according to the slowest ship," he added.

One of the purposes of the RIS, as set by the Dean, was diagnostic. The institution receives applications from people of many different backgrounds and it is sometimes difficult to assess their potential for post-graduate research on the basis of their prior academic record. "Immediately we are confusing things again," the same person interjected, "what are the standards here? The problem with having too many people who we are looking at (while we take their money) is that the wrong dynamics get into play."

The Admissions tutor hadn't finished. "At the end of the pre-registration stage," he said, "if we find students not capable of continuing then there needs to be a clear decision to allow them to withdraw. Instead, at the moment, we allow them to continue." I had become aware of several students who had been in pre-registration for more than two years. "One advantage of bringing mentors into the process sooner," I said, "is that you become conscious of these issues sooner. But then I want to encourage you to come to the seminars when your students are presenting." "I can't participate in them all," the member who had held up the meeting while we moved his table, responded, "but if there is a student that I am going to help ..." "But that's the problem," I reacted, "even after mentors were appointed they did not come to seminars to support their own students."

I sensed that the atmosphere in the room was changing. No-one responded and my criticism was allowed to join the other perspectives that had been offered earlier in the meeting. At this stage the discussion had been going for half an hour and I suggested that we turned to address some questions of content. Over the next 50 minutes we discussed critical issues in epistemology, research methods and the development of the online learning environment. As the session came to a close I invited a closing round of comments. The staff member who had been arguing strongly for the early appointment of mentors made no reference to the topic, but instead told the group of an event he had just attended at the Open University (OU). "Let me offer some encouragement," he said. "I was planted into a working group talking about how to build community - everyone is talking about community. It did make it obvious to me that we are streets ahead (emphasis in his

voice) of all the other sponsoring establishments, and indeed the OU Research School itself.” Another member who had also attended the event added, “And, in regard to the workshop I was assigned to, we are streets ahead in being student centred.” “Perhaps we may be overdoing it,” the first one concluded.

I offer this anecdote to explore a critical aspect of my action in the world. How can I improve the way in which I get things done in the world? Is it possible to intervene, from a position of influence, in ways that can change the culture? Can collective deliberation make a positive difference? In the incident reported above I find it interesting that I chose to witness what others were saying about the appointment of mentors and encouraged a discussion of the proposal to fast forward the decision. I did not agree with the idea, either on principal or politics, but it was also evident that opinions were divided. The issues involved in the decision are ambiguous. Mentoring of individual students is a call on staff time (something that academics protect vigorously) and there are wider question of quality to consider.

There are different ways of getting things done. I had executive authority in organising the Induction School and could have exercised positional power as I did in the earlier incident. I could have resorted to argument, seeking to change my colleagues minds and persuade them of my opinion. Although it didn’t occur to me at the time, I might have been able to set up a small collaborative inquiry around mentoring practice to facilitate an iterative cycle of inquiry during the school. However I suspect that the level of interest by staff members would have been below the threshold of participation. Instead, by witnessing the proposal for a change in practice and withholding my opinion, I sensed that the group was able to work in an open space that allowed different voices to surface and the topic to evolve in-the-moment. I did not know the outcome at the pivotal moment I took this direction and I certainly could not have manipulated the conclusion. However, I had observed that even when mentors were assigned early, they did not support their students adequately and this was something I was able to say later in the discussion when I felt it was appropriate. The meeting did not make a formal

decision but I was able to invest the social capital it had given me to develop the practice of peer and group support and postpone the appointment of individual mentors.

As I reflect on this process now I realise that, in the situation, it was not enough to consciously interpreting the experience in terms of Torbert's (2004) territories or parts of speech. I did not subject my mental models to scrutiny using the ladder of inference (Senge et al 1994) or other inquiry tools to examine my assumptions or beliefs. I was hesitantly, yet intentionally, managing my power and presence in the group and making choices around whether to act authoritatively, offer persuasive argument, or provide an open space for the group to participate in an emergent process. It was a judgment in-the-moment that was not based on rational argument but relational commitments.

## **Towards Haptic Vision**

Many of the metaphors for knowledge are associated with the visual sense - insight, observation, perspective, for example. Sight objectifies the world, locating everything as external to me. I am at the centre of the world. It is perceived from my point of view, creating what Einstein called "the optical delusion of our consciousness" (Senge et al 2005, 203). Martin Jay (2005) identifies it as a characteristic of modernity, describing it as an ocularcentric bias in the culture - the dominance of sight over other senses.

This may work well in daylight with good visibility. But life in organisations is not always so clear. There were times when Brendan and his companions were covered by a dense blanket of fog making progress on their journey impossible. It is when sight is removed that our other senses are able to access and bring to consciousness a different kind of knowledge of the world around us, as the story of Jacques Lusseyran (Kornfield & Feldman 1996) so powerfully illustrates. Shortly after becoming blind as a child Lusseyran realised that he could still see but that

initially he “was looking too far off, and too much on the surface of things” (Kornfield & Feldman 1996, 97). He discovered a light which, without his eyes, “was much more stable than it had been with them” (ibid 98). It only faded when he was afraid or impatient. It was his emotion that made him blind.

“I could no longer afford to be jealous or unfriendly, because, as soon as I was, a bandage came down over my eyes, and I was bound hand and foot ... All at once a black hole opened, and I was helpless inside it.” (ibid 101).

It was not, he suggests, that his blindness made his hearing improve, but he was able to make better use of his hearing. Gradually his body which had been disoriented by his blindness came back to him, learning in new ways to be wise. He learned that the eyes run over the surface of things, half seeing, satisfied with appearances. Smell and touch helped him really connect with things, no longer living in front of things, but living with them.

“All of us, whether blind or not, are terribly greedy. We want things only for ourselves. ... But a blind child learns very quickly that this cannot be. He has to learn it, for every time he forgets that he is not alone in the world he strikes against an object, hurts himself and is called to order. But each time he remembers he is rewarded, for everything comes his way” (ibid 112).

The physical example of blindness is a metaphor for the social discernment I was seeking. Stephen Pattison (2008) suggests that all of us can transcend what he calls our “ordinary blindness” by giving closer attention to the phenomenology of what is around us, ordinary and extraordinary, “mantelpieces and masterpieces,” to quote from the title of his Gifford Lectures. He proposes a more inter-sensorial, comprehensive notion of sight, that he names “haptic vision,” a phrase that deliberately links touching and seeing, an invitation to a quality of knowing through relationship with the artifact. Lusseyran describes in intimate detail his delight at discovering things through pressure.

"If I put my hand on the table without pressing it, I knew the table was there, but knew nothing about it. To find out, my fingers had to bear down, and the amazing thing is that the pressure was answered by the table at once. Being blind I thought I should have to go out and meet things, but I found that they came to meet me instead. I have never had to go more than halfway, and the universe became the accomplice of all my wishes" (Kornfield & Feldman 1996, 106).

There is a further analogy, appropriate to this perspective, in the images of the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Orthodox theology led to the emergence of a new artform - the icon (a word adopted as a metaphor in computing but in the process robbed of its deeper meaning). Icons are a representation of the transcendent in a form that invites participation. Icons are a rejection of the objectivity of the Renaissance in western art where the focal point disappears into the distance. Icons reach into the space in front of them, inviting relationship. Their focal point is in front of the icon, giving the viewer a sense of intimacy and an invitation to deeper participation with the image. Or again, in the discipline of writing, Natalie Goldberg advises the writer to make friends with what they write about, to "go so deep into something that you understand its interpenetration with all things" (Goldberg [1986] 2005, 82). She exposes the illusion that lies in the syntax of the English language. The subject/verb/object structure of the language puts the subject in control, subject acting on the object. No wonder, since we think through language, that we act as if we are masters of the universe.

## **Putting Heart and Soul into Research**

In the second half of 2005 the Board of Directors of the Centre led the senior staff in a major review of its purpose, structure and future programmes. The Centre was set up more than 20 years ago by Christians from the non-western world to provide an opportunity for advanced, critical research and reflection on their involvement in culture and society particularly in contexts of marginalisation and poverty. The

Centre was established in the UK with the explicit purpose of validating this knowledge in the citadel of western scholarship and learning.

The founders were aware of some of the difficulties this would create. They wanted to avoid the practical reality of competent students being assimilated into western culture at great cost, or returning home with knowledge of little relevance to their context. At the beginning these concerns were overcome through the establishment of a non-residential PhD programme validated, initially, by the CNA<sup>23</sup> and then the Open University. But the subtle influence of western ways of knowing have nevertheless crept in through, for example, lack of attention to the wider epistemological questions, and the influence of a diverse group of well meaning academic supervisors with limited first-hand experience of the non-western world.

In November the founder-director convened a faculty/student seminar to discuss this issue. His concern was the possible alienation of PhD students from their own context. It was a frank admission that the Western academy had subtly and yet effectively undermined the very purpose for which the Centre existed. "The luxury of getting a PhD and then later producing useful products is no longer possible. Our research needs to have demonstrable value in our own contexts now," he said. To conclude his remarks he asked the students present two quite personal questions. "Have you developed skills that your context does not need or cannot use?" And, "are you so changed by your studies that you are little use back in your context (has your usefulness been reduced)?"

The discussion that followed was shaped by this question: "How can we prevent this alienation from our context as a result of our research?" My mind turned towards my own research interests and its possible convergence with these

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<sup>23</sup> The Council for National Academic Awards (CNA<sup>23</sup>) was formed in 1965 to award degrees to graduates of programmes offered by polytechnics and private institutions in the UK. It was dissolved in 1992 to be replaced by external validation through the Open University and subsequently other universities in the UK.



concerns. I was reminded of the balance suggested by Jay Wood (1998) in his book *Epistemology: Becoming Intellectually Virtuous*:

"So the focus of our thinking about epistemological excellence, I argue, should be the unfolding careers of knowers and the care they display in orienting themselves toward ends they deem valuable. Viewing epistemological questions in career terms, as the concerns of a lifetime, requires that we attend to the processes of belief formation, maintenance and revision, not just the specific outputs of these processes... Epistemology, then, is not (or ought not be) concerned merely with the piecemeal appraisal of individual beliefs but with what kinds of persons we are and are becoming..." (Wood 1998, 26)

In January 2006 I used an opportunity to contribute to the series of open lectures at the Centre to explore my own emerging perspectives on holistic research. I observed the discrepancy between the non-western contexts from which most of our students come and the western academy. The Enlightenment established a clear demarcation between the empirical world (that we can see and touch) and the world of the spirit, a division that is unrecognised in many of our cultures. I entitled the lecture "Putting Heart and Soul into Research: An Inquiry into becoming Scholar, Practitioner, Saint" (Adams 2008), and presented the issue as a personal question:

"In what ways are the epistemological assumptions of the academy influencing what I am becoming through my inquiry? Some of you will find the taken-for-granted worldview intimidating and easily succumb to what Donald Schon calls its "technical rationality." None of us is immune to its subtle inoculation into particular ways of framing reality."

At the end of the lecture I invited anyone who was interested to explore this further to join me for a meal and a discussion on the following Tuesday. Although I had no experience of the approach, I was hoping to facilitate a collaborative inquiry

involving cycles of action and reflection on our research experience. It is worth acknowledging that while I saw this as a great opportunity I was pretty anxious. I wrote in my journal on January 27th, just three days before the lecture:

“My feeling at this stage of preparation - overwhelmed. I am confused and uncertain about how (or even whether) to continue. One part of me is feeling ‘wow - this is great!’. Another side feels weak, lacks any confidence that I will be able to pull all this together by Tuesday (if ever). Is this mental exhaustion, or anxiety about letting the heart in on my work? And there are wider circumstances. I have been disappointed in the lack of progress on my contract and I even received a speeding ticket in the post this morning. The terra is no longer firma.”

## Collaborative Inquiry

The practice of cooperative or collaborative inquiry has its roots in *Human Inquiry*, a seminal text, edited by Reason and Rowan (1981). The subsequent literature in the field (Heron 1988, 1996, 1999; Bray et al 2000; Baldwin 2002; Reason 2002, 2003) describes an open, shared process of inquiry cycles over time. Even if some can be Dionysian in process (Heron 1996), they are governed by a clear sense of purpose and general structure. From this literature I had drafted a set of ideas about how to organise the inquiry and a number of questions I planned to bring to the group, although as I reflect on this preparation now, I realise that it was no more than a prop. I needed to trust the process, and even more importantly, the people who became involved.

Despite several attempts to get confirmation of the numbers attending this proved difficult and I was feeling quite anxious as the time of the meeting drew closer, particularly since I had committed to cater for 15 people. In the end 9 people turned up (6 students and 3 faculty, including myself). I was particularly pleased

that 2 members of the faculty took the time to come, and with the diverse background of the group - Europe, Africa, China, Pacific Islands and the USA.

Many of our students live in simple accommodation and the meal provided an opportunity not only to satisfy our hunger at the end of the day but also to develop informal relationships before we began our conversation. When the meal was over we cleared an open space in the middle of the room. It is not common for us to "show our knees" in meetings in the Centre but it seemed important to me to push the tables to the side of the room and sit in a circle. One faculty member manoeuvred the corner of a table into the circle so that he "had somewhere to place his coffee cup." This was later pushed back when a late-comer joined the group. I was reminded of Kate McArdle's experience of re-arranging the furniture for the first meeting in her co-operative inquiry with young women in management (McArdle 2002).

I gave a brief introduction in which I quickly reviewed the purpose of our time together and repeated the questions I had posed in the lecture - to ask, how is my research shaping my personal development and in what ways can we, as a community, be more intentional, individually and institutionally, in encouraging more holistic development? After a brief description of the collaborative inquiry process we decided to break into pairs to start the conversation. My partner graduated from Gordon Conwell Seminary in the USA. I learned that these questions are frequently discussed in the American seminary context but although the spiritual aspect of student life is supported and encouraged, exceptional students can graduate with honours without evidence of spiritual formation. "So is the problem in the assessment regime?" I asked. This led to an interesting discussion of how this could be assessed and what would need to change in the curriculum/learning environment to nurture this development. There are economic pressures when funds are tied to academic performance.

The feedback from the other groups was more personal. A student from Tonga said, "my research is my current vocation - this is where I belong." I didn't realise it

at the time but I would glimpse what this meant for myself a few weeks later (see below). One of the faculty told us that his PhD research had sustained him spiritually - he felt that his studies had fed his soul. A student from Kenya said, "I started my research wanting to make a difference in my context. I now realise, one year later, that my research is changing me."

I invited the group to stand while I placed a label carrying the words "scholar", "practitioner" and "saint" on the back of three chairs positioned in three corners of the room.<sup>24</sup> I invited everyone to go and stand behind the role they felt most comfortable in. Five went to the practitioner chair, three to the saint and one (a faculty member) to the scholar. After inviting them to reflect for a few moments on how they saw the other chairs from that vantage point I then suggested that they moved to the one they felt least comfortable with. Four went to the saint chair, three to the scholar and two to the practitioner. After a few moments I suggested that we write down our thoughts and feelings about the experience. Then, in groups of three we shared what we had written and spent some time talking about what we had noticed and what sense we had made of the experience.

I found myself with a Croatian and a Chinese student. The first told us that he was very uncertain about where he felt most comfortable and expressed a desire to stand between two of the chairs, although this was not permitted by the rules of the game. The Chinese said, "Within the regulations of the game I had no hesitation - I went immediately to the 'saint' chair. Knowing God is of first importance. But I also know that I can know God best through good practice and good scholarship. The intellect is very important but it is only a part of my life. I cannot survive just as a scholar or just as a practitioner but I can survive as just a saint."

My own experience had been different again. I noticed the walls I have built between my spirituality and my practice and scholarship which means that I have

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<sup>24</sup> This exercise was based on a suggestion by Paul Feldwick in a CARPP supervision session. Thank you Paul!

no way of letting them inform each other - I can only work on them one at a time. I also noticed my reluctance to go to 'scholar' and wondered why?

In the final few minutes of debriefing someone observed that, like the rules of the game, the western academy sets the parameters for what constitutes valid knowledge. In the end what is examined is a thesis (knowledge that can be represented in a particular form) not the person who discovers and holds the knowledge (although they are expected to defend it). Do we simply accept these rules or build an argument for changing them? I found myself reflecting on our smaller group discussion about Chinese ways of knowing. In Chinese culture, I had learned, you cannot separate scholar and saint - knowledge and knower - it is impossible to talk of one without the other. One validates the other.

We had ended the evening recognising our dilemma. We are not comfortable suppressing or denying part of ourselves and our multiple ways of knowing for the benefit of gaining a credential. We parted company with an agreement to carry the question into our work over the next few weeks and to continue to interact online. The following day I set up an online forum to provide an interactive space to carry the conversation forward. In the next few days several of the group contributed their reflections on the meeting and added some additional resource material. A brief report and the date and time of our next meeting was circulated to the wider community. Word of our discussion quickly spread. The Executive Director (who had been overseas at the time of my lecture) expressed his support for the process and several others indicated an interest in participating. I subsequently heard from a second member of the Board of Governors supporting the initiative. The process became known as "The Tuesday Inquiry".

I had to think on my feet on several occasions. Just minutes before the dinner I was approached by my co-director on the MA in Development Practice, asking whether the meeting was official and was he required to attend, adding: "How controversial do you want the evening to be? You are a late comer to the research community - I've been at it for 40 years." He had a distinguished academic record as Professor of

Development Studies at a large UK university before joining our team on retirement. I had come to know him as a convinced positivist and it would have been easy for me to say, "No, you are not required or expected at the meeting," but I realised that we needed to hear his voice in the conversation, and so I told him, "No, it is not official, but I would personally welcome your contribution." He came, and to my surprise, contributed constructively and helpfully to our discussions. At the end of the discussion he proposed that we all re-read my paper in the light of the evening. "You have, for example, made use of ideas from the beginnings of the enlightenment and from Medieval sources," he said, "this discussion needs to feed in other perspectives - team work. While I appreciate your perspective, I am psychologically not fitted for the mysticism of the Middle Ages."

A month passed before our next meeting and I was anxious that the momentum might have been lost. Several of those who had participated in the first meeting told me that they would not be able to attend but I put up a small poster on the notice board in the hope of recruiting a few more participants. Seven of us met on a cold and damp Tuesday evening at the beginning of March. I was eager to hear what others had learned since our first meeting.

I had not heard the last from my Development colleague! He opened the conversation with a criticism of the title I had given my lecture and the typology I had used. For him the notion of "heart and soul" was old fashioned and he objected to the place I had given the heart ("the heart is just a pump"). His preferred typology would be "body, mind and spirit" and he quoted several sources of authority for his choice. We were not off to a good start. In my exchange with him before our first meeting I had told him that I didn't want the conversation to become too philosophical - I felt the need to explore our research journeys at a more experiential level.

What caught me by surprise however was my own response. Rather than adopt a tactic to exclude the criticism (something I have done many times before in classrooms and board meetings) I found myself embracing it. In-the-moment I

recalled the Biblical injunction to "love God with all your heart, and soul, and mind and strength." I quickly recognised the rebuke, by both my colleague and Jesus, and agreed to the essential need for embodied knowledge in the typology, but at the same time I insisted, this time with support from Jesus, on retaining the heart. It seemed a reasonable accommodation!

It occurred to me later that there might be a way forward in determining the appropriate aspects of human wholeness and learning in the notion of multiple intelligences. I had been reading Stephen Covey (2004) *The 8th Habit* and found his discussion on this topic helpful. In a few sentences Covey pays tribute to Howard Gardner's work on multiple intelligence and summarises other typologies:

"Some books separate out visual intelligence from verbal, analytical, artistic, logical, creative, economic and other intelligences....but (I) believe you can put them all under the four areas of body, mind, heart and spirit - the four dimensions of life" (Covey 2004, 54).

Rather than remove emotional intelligence from the list, as my colleague was suggesting, I saw the disembodied nature of my earlier typology - what Jesus calls "strength", and Covey calls "physical intelligence" - and happily added it to the model. With this change the typology feels more complete and its simplicity appeals to me. Here, perhaps, are the four dimensions of learning I need to hold together in my practice as a learning facilitator.

In planning the inquiry process I had struggled with the ground rules. Should participation be restricted to those who were willing to commit to the inquiry in the long term or should it be more open? I could see benefits and difficulties with either. The next intervention convinced me of the value of welcoming newcomers. CP is from Zimbabwe and was mid-way through his PhD research. "It's the topic that needs to drive our inquiry," he said,

"My faith is intrinsically a part of me as a researcher but I need the freedom to pursue my topic without the expectation that in the process I might be able to give voice to the faith dimension. It is almost as if the bird is flying and someone is trying to put a cage on it. I need to allow my work to mature without this cage being thrown on it."

We had almost finished our conversation when the student from China (who had remained fairly quiet) intervened:

"I don't think the basic issue is spirituality or faith - it is in the nature of our questions. Whatever we do, we have to start with a question. I am thinking of the simplicity of children's questions - how, what, when, etc. Relatively speaking they are not so knowledgeable. But I think, for me, this is more interesting. We are on a certain stage and we are playing a certain game with other characters. We need to come to the very root - what are we doing as researchers? We might take a lifetime to define our human nature. We need, first of all to be simple. Simplicity is not a place - it's a direction."

The brief evaluation at the end of the evening produced some affirmative feedback:

"Just two words - highly content. It's a starter in restaurant terms..."

"For me I appreciate this engagement on a second level - we often talk about the content of research and methodology but the thinking behind research is very important - it frames the work. It is the kind of conversation that will help me bring the pieces together."

"I enjoy any conversation about research..."

"I have thought and talked about these things before but it seems that you really want to do something about it and I am excited about this."

We met five times between February and July with numbers varying between seven and twelve. We used a variety of tools to facilitate the discussion, including



non-cognitive forms of presentation. We exchanged stories with each other and, on one occasion, produced drawings of our research selves to explore a more embodied understanding of our inquiry. We had been meeting for several months when the conversation turned to ourselves as the research instrument. There was laughter when someone first mentioned the idea and asked how to present this methodology in a thesis. Several quickly confirmed that their inquiries had changed them but that they had not referred to this in their writing. As we played with the idea of “discernment” we began to talk of a “spirit” that enables our inquiry.

Since our last meeting one of the group had attended an International Conference on Women in Development in Korea at which she had been asked to coordinate the reports from several groups on the implementation of the UN Millennium Development Goals. Faced with different kinds of people (professional and cultural) she tried to encourage an open exploration of the issues. After participating in the group discussions and watching some of the presentations in the morning she felt an urge to confront the approach being taken by some of the session leaders and requested a special lunch with the people who chaired the session to encourage a more open exploration. Despite some objection the groups followed her advice and the report that came out of the process was warmly received by the conference. The term she used of her approach was “humility” but she also spoke of praying about the situation and opening herself to the “spirit” that enables inquiry.

As I reflect on the experience of the journey and my account of it here I notice several issues relevant to my inquiry. This was the first time that I had facilitated a collaborative inquiry and I was quite anxious about the process. First person inquiry skills were still important - paying attention to what was going on; monitoring outcomes, actions, and purpose; listening to my feelings and managing my presence in-the-moment. But I also felt the burden of holding an inclusive space for other voices; listening to other experiences; and folding these into my own sense making. There was something invigorating and scary about balancing my

role as facilitator, judging when I was being overly directive or failing to provide enough structure, and as a co-inquirer, seeking with others in the group to make sense of the experience. At times I was captured by the energy in the space and then refreshed by the moments of quieter collective reflection. I came away from the process aware of the amazing diversity of experience and insight I was privileged to work with and a growing appreciation for those who shared the journey.

We had worked on the boundary between system and lifeworld, providing a communicative space exhibiting many of the paradoxes noted by Wicks and Reason (2009). Although participation in the group changed as the inquiry continued, a core group helped maintain an open and inclusive attitude that quickly integrated newcomers into the process. Inevitably with an open membership, however, there were participants who had not contracted into earlier cycles of the inquiry and this diluted a sense of collective progress. The group nevertheless maintained a clear sense of purpose and there was a shared ownership of the topics of discussion arising from the experience and reflection of the participants. For a short time our inquiry was aligned with the institution's (system's) interests. Stories of individual lifeworlds emerged in the process that could have resourced the institutional inquiry but the institutional questions that had triggered my lecture and the collaborative inquiry that followed were quickly forgotten. While we had institutional support and encouragement, the institutional leadership had not participated in the inquiry.

The inquiry process lost momentum over the summer and, with my assignment as pre-registration Stage Leader in September, I was even more embedded in an institutional role. There was no opportunity to continue the inquiry or extend it to new students joining the programme. But we had, for six months, participated in a community of collaborative inquiry that had deepened our appreciation for more holistic research practices. There were limits to what we did. I carry a lingering question about whether we had reached any agreement on how we might hold "heart, mind, soul and strength" together in our research, or simply facilitated a

process by which individuals were helped in their personal choices through interaction with others in a supportive and creative environment. There was possibly a little of both.

## **Taking a Relational Attitude to Inquiry**

My inquiry now involved a wide range of stakeholders (including students, the institution, several professional contexts and employees) and I realised that I would need to employ second person inquiry methods to continue my work. I had reached a stage in my inquiry in which I wanted to experiment with more relational ways of knowing. Jean McNiff talks about the need “to generate knowledge about how ... knowledge is produced within and through relationships and what kind of relationships are necessary for this process” (McNiff 2002, xi). Paulo Freire (1970) observes that, “the thinking Subject cannot think alone. In the act of thinking about the object s/he cannot think without the co-participation of another Subject. There is no longer an “I think” but “we think.””

There are occasions when it is possible to obtain explicit agreement from a group of people to engage in mutual inquiry such as the one described above. However my experience with the collaborative inquiry had left me conscious of the way in which a formal process like this includes and excludes members of the community. For many (students and faculty) and, crucially in this case, institutional leadership, the level of “collective curiosity” (Herr & Anderson 2005, 73) was too low for them to invest the time in a formal process. But I realised I was involved in dozens of conversations, meeting and seminars every week that I could view in a different way. Was it possible to see these quotidian social interactions in a relational way? Could I change the way in which I participated in these situations that might enhance the quality of knowing and acting that they produced? Thomas Merton suggests that we can only find ourselves in and through others. The self I seek is not isolated and individual (Merton in Del Prete 1990, 46). What might be involved

in discovering that “I am a person through people” (Bantu African) in the informal and even casual interactions of every day?

The distinction between first and second person inquiry becomes blurred at this point. While I remain an agent in the inquiry, I am not alone. I can discern the shift from first to second person inquiry as I move from the outer arcs of attention (Marshall 2001) in which I am aware of the other, to soliciting the active participation of the other, moving from my own subjectivity to become aware of and engaged with the other. What constitutes such a solicitation? I began to work with the notion of posture and described it as a relational attitude of inquiry. I began to give attention to the posture I adopted in conversations and group discussions and brought into my reflective practice questions such as:

- what space am I providing for the other?
- in what ways am I inviting a relationship?
- what is the quality of my listening?
- am I showing respect?
- how can I enable the other to find their voice?
- are my questions inquisitive, curious, appreciative?
- have I explored what outcomes we might share in common?
- what quality of being are we creating?

Barber (2006) offers a number of other practical questions in a similar vein (2006, 133). Crucial to the success of this approach to inquiry is a willingness to listen deeply, or as Wheatley suggests, to “bear witness” (Wheatley 2002, 82-83), to move the centre of attention from myself and what I am sensing to the other, to look at people inclusively, bringing them within in the circle of my own being, rather than using my eyes to alienate and exclude.

I did not find this easy, particularly when navigating organisational territory that was disturbed by my action as the following incident in my practice illustrates. Let me first give a brief description of the background before giving an account of the

incident itself. As a part of the institutional review the Board had decided to close the existing Master's programmes and mandated the development of a generic post-graduate programme for mid-career practitioners. I was recruited to work with the Academic Dean on the project. As we worked with the university and explored the potential market for the programme it became clear that there was a substantial interest in offering a PhD in Professional Practice (this project forms a central feature of my inquiries in the next chapter). I quickly found myself handling enquiries from around the world and realised that they would need to be processed in a different way to the existing research programme. But was the difference sufficient to require changes in admissions procedure? Opinion was divided, particularly in how to handle enquiries from research candidates who were undecided about which programme to join. We could now offer a choice, the traditional PhD by research, suited particularly to those pursuing a career in the academy, and a practitioners PhD, designed for individuals in professional life.

As the number of enquiries built up I knew that it was not appropriate for me to handle them directly and I recognised that they needed to be logged and managed by the admissions office. We designed a different application form but it was not always clear which form to send to the enquirer. The Admissions Tutor (AT), who would normally handle academic enquiries was not familiar with practitioner research. The issue came to a head when I realised that several dozen enquiries had not been processed and, as a result, their applications were not presented on the agenda of the Admissions Committee.

Following some discussion in the Admissions Committee, I was asked to meet with the AT to resolve the matter. Just before the meeting he emailed the Dean, with a copy to me, to say that he would not attend the meeting because "I do not think I need to be there as (the administrator) needs to compare her list with Dave's to make sure we have everyone covered. Thanks for excusing me." I went immediately to his desk to explain that I felt we needed a more in depth discussion about the admissions process and asked him to reconsider his attendance. He came to the meeting where, as I entered the meeting space, I found him, with the

administrator, reviewing a list of six names they had on their database who had enquired/applied for the new programme.

They handed it to me and I glanced at the names. Only one was unknown to me. I had dozen's of names that had not been entered on their system but, rather than review them, I used their existence to explain what I saw as the task we needed to address in managing enquiries of this nature. I had drawn a concept map of the process, as I saw it, and presented it briefly. There were two issues - our ability to coordinate enquirer information and contacts, and the handling of applicants who were undecided about the programme they wanted to enter.

The conversation turned to the case of an individual who had already enrolled in the traditional programme and now wanted to transfer to the practitioner programme. Since she was already enrolled this was not, in the opinion of the AT, an admissions issue. It needed to be referred to the Research Degrees Committee. But this was an institutional matter, not a programme matter. The Research Degrees Committee was responsible for the traditional PhD.

"If there is a situation like this we can just talk about it," the AT was saying, "we don't need everything so well organized. The Dean and I were just talking at lunch time about Indian markets - they may appear chaotic but they work. You may not understand that." For some reason I felt patronised by his comment and said so. "Don't patronise me ... the number of enquiries is growing and we are now offering students a choice - this will need more involvement from faculty to advise potential participants and we will need different ways of handling the process."

This is an example of an informal social process in which I had agency, the kind of conversation that happens every day in organisations as they adjust to change. Perhaps I was too efficient. I was certainly task focused. I noticed our eyes never met across the table. Our expectations of the conversation were quite different. I hoped that the meeting would help develop admission procedures that would accommodate the new programme. Perhaps he thought the new applicants could

be processed through the existing procedures. Presenting a concept map of the process he was responsible for may not have been the best way to negotiate change. I had taken time to produce it on computer and had printed it in colour giving the impression of a finished design!

Patricia Shaw (2002) makes an important connection between everyday conversations and the "patterns of interdependencies" (2002, 72) that Norbert Elias called "figurations." Power is not an attribute of individuals but a feature of their relationships. All relating involves a dynamic distribution of power by which identities are formed and modified. "Others have value for us as they offer, withhold and change their responses to our responses, generating for each of us feelings of being more or less powerful, influential or powerless" (Shaw 2002, 73). This leads me to interpret this incident in terms of what Bateson (1956) called "the double bind." Had I, unknowingly at the time, put the AT in a double bind? In my journal notes following the meeting I considered the possibility that he was being defensive. Did my action imply criticism of the way Admissions currently worked? Had my insistence that he attend the meeting given him no escape? Was he forced to choose, in front of the administrator, between the procedures that had served their purpose well, and the unknown consequences of accommodating the new programme? Did the concept map of the process, and the polished form I used to present it, convey a meta-communication that I had not intended? I wonder whether the metaphor of an Indian market might have been an attempt to shift the discussion onto safer ground, a communication tactic Bateson suggests is characteristic of the victim in a double bind (1956, 210).

The incident exhibits a professional behaviour that was task driven and ignored the relational aspects of organisational life. I have told the story here to avoid an impression that I was progressing smoothly towards more relational ways of knowing and more empowering management styles. There were times when the urgency of the work, or anxiety, left me confused. There is no straight line path to the cultivation of these skills of inquiry and social practice. Yet, when I did stumble I had become more conscious of the failure and my curiosity about relational

practices was heightened. How might these everyday conversations be more inquiring and productive? How might I reflect more consciously on the quality of relationship involved? What might be involved in taking a more relational attitude to inquiry and practice?

## A Relational Ontology

It might be helpful, first, to describe more carefully what I mean by relational and explain its roots in my faith tradition as a way of exploring its influence on my practice. As I do so I notice, once again, an intention to weave experience, personal reflection and ideas into the narrative. The word "relation" can be used in different ways. We use it of family members; to make comparisons (relating one object to another to make comparisons in size, weight or other, less tangible, properties); to describe associations (connecting, for example, a smell or sound with distant memories, or linking phenomena to one another - clouds with rain, a hostile voice with fear, etc); as a synonym for telling stories or giving an account of an experience; and, as a way of referencing similar concepts. What these different uses of the word have in common is the notion of connection, whether of people, objects or ideas. I am using the term, in particular, to point towards an ontology, a way of thinking about reality that sees all things as fundamentally interconnected. It may not satisfy the philosophical purists but it serves my purpose to name this way of understanding reality a "relational ontology". Heron and Reason (1997) talk about it as a "participatory paradigm." Heron says,

"The participative perspective sees a world not of separate things, as a positivist view would have, nor as a socially reinforced construction of the human mind as held by various relativist perspectives, but rather of relationships we co-author. The world we experience as "reality" is subjective-objective, a co-creation that involves the primal givenness of the cosmos and human experience, imagination and intuition, thinking and construing, and intentional action in the world" (Heron 1992).



As an ontology, relationality inspires a set of values and describes an attitude of inquiry that gives attention to the connections as the locus of meaning. This should not be seen as a transactional model in the sense of Dewey's billiard balls, interactions that may change the trajectory of the balls but has little or no effect on the balls themselves. A relational ontology offers a more fundamental connectedness perhaps best described by reference to my religious tradition.

The Christian imagination, occupied over several centuries with an understanding of God as encountered in Jesus Christ and experienced through the Holy Spirit, evolved an image of God as Trinity. Although Kant is reported to have said that "absolutely nothing worthwhile for the practical life can be made out of the doctrine of the Trinity" (Moltmann 1981, 6), a recent resurgence of interest in the topic has produced a substantial literature (Rahner 1970; Boff 1988; Gunton 1993; Volf 1998; Fiddes 2000; Zizioulas 1985, 2006) that provides a helpful frame for my inquiries into relational practice. The Western tradition, heavily influenced by Augustine's "psychological model" of the Trinity, and the Eastern tradition, shaped by Gregory of Nyssa and the Cappadocian Fathers and their "social" perspective are, today, involved in a creative development. Current scholarship is finding in the Trinity a vision for feminism (Johnson 1992), democracy (de Gruchy 1995), pluralism (Karkkainen 2007), and psychotherapy (Cooper-White 2007).

Popular analogies of the Trinity are not helpful. Ice is water; liquid water is water; water vapour is water, the same thing existing in three forms, suggesting the image of the Father melting into the Son and then evaporating into the Spirit. Although both  $1+1+1=3$  and  $1 \times 1 \times 1=1$  are true statements, this eliminates the difference between the individuals and limits their relationship to addition or multiplication. The early Christians were struggling to find images and words to give expression to what they had experienced of God. After Jesus, they could no longer simply talk about "God". They found it necessary to speak about "the love of the Father, the grace of the Lord Jesus and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit" (1

Cor 13:14) although it would take several centuries before the ideas would find maturity.

Lucian Turcescu, a Romanian scholar, argues that the emergence of a trinitarian understanding of God lead to important changes in the understanding of the human person. Individuality came to be seen not as a form of atomism, that might be described today as a "centre of consciousness", but a view of personhood constituted in relations of active communion (Bates 2010, 9-10)<sup>25</sup>. John Zizioulas (1985) contrasts the Greek notion of personalness as something additional to one's core being or essential nature, with the understanding of person resulting from Trinitarian thought, in which relational being is a matter of ontology: "to be and to be in relation becomes identical" (Zizioulas 1985, 88). No person exists by him or herself.

This understanding of personhood in the Trinity is captured by Paul Fiddes in the following way: "If we use the term *hypostasis* as the early theologians did for a "distinct reality" which has being, then the relations *are* hypostases. There are no persons "at each end of the relation", but the "persons" are simply the relations" (Fiddes 2000, 34). The three persons of the Trinity are de-concretised, each person being entirely with reference to the other. At the same time, as Gunton (1993) points out, the image retains an understanding of particularity in the persons in relationship, rather than sameness. In theological language there is coinherence without confusion. The names for God, "and especially "Father, Son and Spirit" can properly be used as a kind of shorthand for the movements of relationship" (Fiddes 2000, 40).

Perhaps the best know icon of the Trinity was painted by Andre Rublev in the 15th century. The figures of the Trinity form a circle. The eyes of each figure encircling the gaze of the other two. The gestures of the hands embracing the others. The mutual relationships of each person in the other was suggested by the Greek word

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<sup>25</sup> I am indebted to Dana Bates for this point, drawn from an unpublished paper prepared for a research seminar April 14th 2010.

"*choreo*", each one containing or filled by the other. In noun form, *perichoresis*, it describes the encircling participation in each other. In the Middle Ages the metaphor was extended to the image of a divine dance perhaps helped by the play on words between *choreo* and *choreia* (dance) (Fiddes 2000), each person fulfilling themselves and expressing themselves in relation to the other, encircling and embracing each other. The Trinitarian God is not an isolated, static ruler of the universe. There is constant change, each person embracing the other in spontaneous, mutual love.

The radical outcome of the Christian tradition is that this dynamic interaction is not limited to God but extended to his creation. The Trinity embraces humanity in its love-dance. In the words of Christ in the Fourth Gospel, "as you, Father are in me, and I am in you, may they also be in us" (John 17:21), humanity is drawn into the dance with the divine.

Despite the centuries that separate us from the theological controversies that led to these ideas, we have not yet fully explored or embraced the significance of this ontological grounding for a relational understanding of the cosmos. The universe exists as an extension of this dance - all creatures participating in the movement of love, harmony and joy. One way of describing the dysfunctional, exploitative world in which we now live is to suggest that humans broke with the dance and decided to create their own, stepping on the toes of other dancers, falling out of rhythm with the rest of creation. A recovery of the *perichoresis* in which we recognise each other as co-dancers in the mutual love of God could go a long way to recovering the respect so necessary to healing our planet.

The Trinity then offers a fluid metaphor for multiplicity and unity, the one and the many (Gunton 1993) and, establishes a relational basis to ontology. In a more poetic appreciation of the Trinity, Pamela Cooper-White (2007) describes it as,

"a waterfall, *full* of light, colour, and dancing shapes, that provide continual refreshment, a long cool drink for parched feelings and hardened thinking,

cleansing for the perceived wounds and stains, cooling for fevered human hubris, and the occasional deluge for those who become too comfortable with the delights of any particular tributary of sacred ideology" (Cooper-White 2007, 82).

## **Wrestling with Control**

These ideas have lingered long in the intellectual background of my life but have not always been evident in my practice. A relational ontology requires a participatory epistemology, re-locating the locus of what is known from the individual consciousness into the relationship between knower and known. This perspective offers a radical alternative to the all encompassing Enlightenment notion that observation is the basic paradigm of knowing and the human mind master of all it surveys. Yet I may acknowledge I live in an interconnected, interpenetrating world and yet continue to cling to my own space and resources. I must learn to let go, to give the "other" space and time to be, and listen to what arises as we co-create reality. This is not, in a phenomenological sense, just a matter of letting go of my ways of seeing and knowing but an invitation to release my grip on power.

In the weeks following my MPhil/PhD transfer (February 2007) I felt two conflicting emotions. One was a desire to linger, to savour the plateau. I had an image of having climbed a hill on my hands and knees with my face to the ground and reaching the top where, below me I could see a winding path, occasional villages and a copse of trees ahead. The other was to press on, realising that I had much work to do. Perhaps both were included in my attempt to draft a paper on methodology - my first description of the landscape that lay before me and, at the same time, a record of the place at which I had arrived. I shared the paper at the next supervision session.

The CARPP approach to research supervision proved, at times, to be very important to my inquiry practice. It was our practice to meet for a full day to discuss our emerging inquiries and support one another. We would often divide the day into one hour sessions in which we would take turns to present our work and invite the contributions of the others as "critical friends" (Costa & Kallick 1993). I was introduced to freefall writing (Goldberg 1986) in some of the early CARPP workshops and from the first occasion it felt awkward and uncomfortable. I was hesitant to share what I had written with others. I put it down to personal preference - just as some are reluctant to paint, I felt "this is not me". So when, at the supervision session, the suggestion was made to do some freefall writing at the end of our work with Nick, one of the members of the group, my heart sank. But I went ahead and put pen to paper, filling a page in the short time we agreed. It was full of incomplete sentences, half formed bullet points and unquestioned claims. I would have happily scrapped the paper at the end of the day and thought no more about it. But this was not to be.

Although I had drafted a paper on methodology I had decided, on this occasion, that I would like to use the occasion to talk about my work with the induction of our new research students. When, therefore, Geoff our supervisor, asked, "What do you want in feedback to your writing?" I had not thought about the question and stumbled into a comment about the shift I felt I had made coming out of the transfer process. "I feel as if I am in a different place - is this evident in the writing? Am I ready to write about methodology?"

"Is there a connection between this paper and your freefall writing?" Nick asked. I thought there was and quoted the first couple of sentences from my freefall writing: "Could my PhD be my way of doing things in the world - the way in which I make choices about what I do and how I do them? The past few months have been hectic and often I feel pressured into spaces that are not life giving." Geoff suggested that I continue to read what I had written but I hesitated "because," I said, "of the patchiness of the writing." Besides, I wanted to tell my story about a new student working in micro-finance and my joy as she had developed her ideas

about poverty alleviation and wealth creation and her desire to recover the lost voices of the poor. I was excited about her desire to engage in collaborative inquiry with them and wanted to share my experience of helping her find her voice.

"Can I start by telling the story?" "Yes," Geoff responded, "but notice your reluctance to go with what is raw and ragged ....

"The chances are that you said something really important in what you wrote in freefall. By not going to that other place what you are saying is "it's not complete, it doesn't make sense." There is something about wanting to stay in control of the story. Just notice this is you, frail, imperfect, and you won't share it..."

I was stung by the challenge. For a moment I wanted to quit - this was getting altogether too complicated and messy. I felt the urge to get up and walk away. I came into the hour thinking that, perhaps, I had glimpsed the horizon. Now everything was out of focus.

As I narrated my experience in working with the student I found myself contrasting the kind of conversations that I enjoyed and the situations, often associated with the demands of the system, that I found draining. As I spoke, I realised that most of my writing is about positive experiences - incidents when things were working well and I felt there was alignment between my espoused theory and practice. I had not written about the shadow side. How do I work with that darker side of my professional life and what meaning can I draw out of it? There were a couple of supportive comments from other members of the group and then Geoff said, "this is a powerful insight, a fractal moment. There is something, for me, I'm very interested in. It seems to me that this is exactly about not going to that other place. It isn't complete."

Nick offered another perspective:

"This makes sense to me what you have said (since I have been on this journey with you). I am really drawn to your account of losing yourself in intimate relationships and what that is for you, what it shows you about the joy that is in there. Everything you've said all connected. I also want to appreciate the risk you have taken. You may not have gone where Geoff wanted to take you but it feels really powerful to sit here and witness that."

As I listen again to the recording of the supervision session I am very conscious of the silences - long silences when nothing is being said. I can even hear the scratching of my pen on the paper next to the microphone - I was obviously writing something. Geoff interrupted the silence, "Can I ask you a question, Dave? I'd like to know what are you writing." "They are prompts of things I want to come back to," I reply. Geoff responded:

"Things we have said? I mention it because, for me, one of the things your writing does here is it stops me from being in relationship with you, not completely of course, but it makes it difficult, because you are not looking at me. So, if you are writing down what is on that tape then I suggest you don't. I know you are interested in relational space, but what you are doing now diminishes it, or to put it differently, when you put down your pen and look at me it vastly improves the quality of the relational space."

Touche - I suddenly felt as if the earth had opened in front of me and I could see strata of meaning beneath the ground on which I had been standing. As I attempt to represent the experience now in writing I am only vaguely aware of some of the questions. Is my inquiry more internal that I espouse? Do I aspire to the qualities of relational inquiry while, when in a tough situation, I retreat into myself rather than holding open the space in which meaning might emerge "between" us? I put down my pen and the conversation moved to the paper I had written before the session on my emerging methodology. I can now see that the paper was an attempt to present a tidy account of my inquiry process but in writing, it had become detached from my practice. A metaphor was forming in my mind as the session unfolded. I

had managed to build a greenhouse in which I was cultivating my inquiry. If I was to take these stories out of the greenhouse and plant them in the garden they would be vulnerable to wind and rain, pests and predators. But am I content to cultivate something that can only live in a greenhouse?

The hour was nearly over but I was now ready to read my freefall writing. This is what I had written:

Could my PhD be my way of doing things in the world - the way in which I make choices about what I do and how I do them? The past few months have been hectic and often I feel pressured into spaces that are not life giving... my motives may include financial benefit, political necessity, etc. How might I make these choices deliberately creative - opening spaces in which I find an alignment of self, purpose and others?

My current choices are around the 4P, the RIS, and the Budapest process<sup>26</sup> as potential sites of fruitful inquiry.

What are the blockages?

- Fear of missed opportunities
- Of failure to fulfill the contract
- Self-affirming "I'm needed around here"
- Of financial uncertainty
- Of threats to home life and personal relationships

If I try to move to a place in which these spaces are more creative what might life be like?

Where do I flourish?

Where have I flourished recently?

- In and with others in learning relationships
- In a training planning meeting (although there was a strong shadow with another participant that deserves attention)
- In conversations with students, but not with faculty

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<sup>26</sup> These were three projects in which I was involved at the time.



What are the differences?

My motives, skills, interests in alignment

Receptivity - is such space based on reciprocal commitment or can reciprocity or acceptance be created by one party?

How can it be lost?

Perhaps my inquiry can be expressed differently...

"In search of integrity and presence - the key to my professional practice"

As I finished reading I was surprised by several voices speaking at once: "Wow - that's exciting (Nick) that is alive, (Geoff) it's juicy, so full of juice"

"But, it feels like bullet points," I said.

"Well, listen to what you are being told," Geoff responded, "This is living inquiringly".

"There are dashes and dotted lines .." I noted.

"Yes, yes", they chorused, "but this is fertile ground."

"The ground may be messy but the way I talk about it doesn't need to be," I argued.

"Yes it does, yes it does," was the response.

"How are we going to smell and taste this beautiful garden if all you are doing is saying "there is a beautiful garden." This is different from saying - sometimes I reflect-in-action and sometimes I write in my journal. That is telling your reader that you do inquiry. It isn't showing me your inquiry. Have the courage to put this into your work - appreciate its qualities which are unfinished, raw, all this brings as well as lacks. It's alive. In process. By sharing it you allow me to enter this world."

Thank you, CARPP colleagues. I had been focusing my inquiry on ways in which I might create a relational space with others only to be surprised by it as a gift from others. There are many blockages to relational inquiry, but perhaps the most significant is in myself - my attempt to pre-meditate my participation, to withhold what is incomplete, to not trust myself to a sentence whose end lies in the future out of my control. Geoff wrote a note on the bottom of my paper on methodology that he forwarded after the session: "I see you on the threshold of another breakthrough (and you may find it where you least expect it... in the mess and the

dirt and the ashes). What would it be like to step more fully into this place of not knowing?"

## Glimpsing the *perichoresis*

I end this chapter with an anecdote that hints at an answer to this question.

Catherine LaCugna (1973) offers the following insight that flows from a relational ontology of the Trinity: "There are neither leaders or followers in the divine dance, only an eternal movement of reciprocal giving and receiving ..." (1973, 312). In September 2008 I participated in a clowning workshop facilitated by Chris Seeley and Carol Thompson. Early in the session we were invited to wander casually around the room and then asked to glance at others as we passed, fixing on the eyes briefly before passing on. As the activity built we were told to catch someone's gaze and hold it, moving around the room in such a way as to keep in eye contact. There were smiles and giggles as we swirled around one another or bounced up above someone's head to avoid someone getting in the way. We experimented with distance, moving closer or further away while fixed on each others eyes. Then we were asked to keep eye contact while trying to hide from each other as we moved. My partner picked up a cushion to cover her face, revealing just her eyes. Someone else grabbed the cushion and for a few moments four of us were tangled up in a spontaneous dance of hide and seek with the cushion.

This focus on the eyes was sustained throughout the remainder of the day as we began to learn of their crucial role in the way the clown communicates with his/her audience. Working from the self that is hidden by the mask, that contact is crucial.

I noticed the eyes the following day at the end of the Singapore Grand Prix. Following the bitter rivalry between Alonso and Hamilton in the 2007 season this was the first time they had both appeared on the rostrum together. Three times Hamilton gestured towards Alonso but there was no indication of its return. This

provoked a comment from me about the importance of eye contact. "Yes," Wanda, my wife, responded, "and I noticed, when you told me this week that the Centre was not going to renew your contract, how you kept your eyes from me."

This triggered further reflection on what had been happening in recent weeks. I had noticed that one member of the staff with whom I had worked closely had not been able to look me directly in the face since the university had taken its decision to terminate our agreement. I had been trying to thaw the relationship and now realised how important eye contact is to restoring confidence. There was a quality of relating in the clowning exercise that has not been evident in my organisational setting in recent weeks with implications for our shared understanding and corporate action. Relational tension was paralysing our action.

The clowning activity continued in pairs and we were invited to take turns in leading the other in mirror movements. As our hand, body and facial movements became more pronounced and dramatic I began to realise the difficulty of trying to think about my actions. It became easier to let myself fall into the activity (a bit like freefall writing in movement). After a few minutes the facilitator suggested we change from being leader or follower and continue the exercise without pre-determining who would lead or follow. For a few moments we both hesitated, waiting for a movement from the other. I moved first and my partner followed but then continued my movement further and I felt myself drawn to follow. It was a fairly clumsy dance but my body felt alert and attentive. I noticed that I was watching my partner's hand or face and found it difficult to anticipate what might happen next. I drew my focus back to take in the whole person, noticing the subtle clues of facial muscle or body tilt that indicated a change in gesture or lead helping us find a synchronicity in our movements.

We were ready for the final stage of the exercise. We were now standing in a loose circle of five with just enough distance between us to allow us to swing our arms. We began by making eye contact with one and then another, trying to hold open a relationship with everyone else in the group. Then we were invited to lead or

follow one other as we introduced movement and sound to our activity. As we began one member yawned involuntarily and we all mirrored her action, which made her laugh - an action we also followed, creating a sense of well being amongst us, the smile remaining on our faces as the exercise continued. As we settled into the exercise there were more subtle changes. At times I was consciously choosing to follow but then I would follow a movement in a slightly different way and someone would notice the variation, exaggerating it as she followed me. I noticed, to my surprise, that for a brief moment I had led the group, but then it had moved forward and I was, again, following. We needed to be reminded to keep eye contact with each other. The person to my left was to one side and I noticed her on several occasions leaning forward to catch my eye - a gesture we all tried to follow.

This was a complex exercise and I would have liked to work with it more. It provided a quality of experiential knowing that is difficult to present in linear text. The invitation to attend to the eyes, gestures and sound in four other individuals as well as choosing when to follow and when to lead was exhausting but fun. I became conscious of the importance of focal and peripheral attention, trying to hold eye contact for subtle clues to what might happen next, catching in the corner of my vision a change in movement from someone else. I noticed the amazing variety of ways each individual followed and then took forward the sounds or movements of others. For a few brief moments it was possible to glimpse a rhythm or flow that I imagined might emerge in more pronounced ways with practise.

I saw the exercise as a metaphor of healthy organisational life. In a crisis we revert to hierarchy and procedure. In a recent meeting in which we were de-briefing on a policy decision by our university partner I became frustrated and asked if we could move on. "I'm in the chair and will decide when we move to the next agenda item" I was told. There was little evidence of shared leadership in the meeting. But then there are moments when no one is paying attention to who is in charge and our corporate activities are mutually reinforcing and enriching.

## Value or Virtue?

As I continue to probe the experiences explored in this chapter I am aware of how easily my actions descend into hubris, assuming my way of reading the world is the right one and imposing my will on others. What is the quality of being that might moderate the hubris and enable me to participate in life, as I did in the clowning exercise, giving focal and peripheral attention to what is happening around me, sometimes leading with a gesture, or joyfully responding to others?

Hubris, Woodruff (2001) suggests, is power without reverence. Reverence has a slightly quaint, old-fashioned feel to it. The ancient virtues have, in my lifetime, slipped from daily conversation, to be replaced by the much over-used word, values. But, as Skidelsky (2010) has pointed out, values are not inherent in the thing that is valued, they are rooted in the act of valuing. Since a value is attributed we can describe a value system without adopting it. "Anything can become a value simply by being valued; the noun is parasitic upon the verb" (ibid 14). In its original use a value simply referred to the price or worth of something. It was adopted, according to Skidelsky, by philosophers in the 19th century as a technical term of evaluation for objects of moral or aesthetic worth, emerging in mainstream culture in the 20th century as "the debased coin of the modern moral economy" (ibid).

When justice or integrity is reduced to a value, its worth can fluctuate by circumstance. So, for example, respect as a value must be earned, that is, it is given on the basis of the opinion I might form of the other person. But, as Woodruff says, "such a condition would shoot a crippling confusion into the heart of any organisation" (Woodruff 2001, 181). I need to live from a place that is less vulnerable to hubris. I may espouse the value of respect for others yet show little of the virtue of reverence.

Reverence arises from an inner harmony that is aware of my own place in the world and in awe of the other, particularly what is different and unknown. Several incidents explored in this chapter reminded me of the limits of my own knowledge.

I have also been brought to face the mystery of others. I cannot fully know the motivations and intentions of others. Reverence welcomes the company of other souls and minds. By nurturing a humble attitude, reverence undergirds good judgement, "the intellectual virtue by which we make reasonable decisions in the absence of knowledge" (Woodruff 2001, 184). Good judgement, as Coles (2002) reminds us, is a key quality of professional practice. So although I might act confidently I must hold lightly to my conclusions, considering them what in philosophy is called *defeasible* (Woodruff 2001, 184), always alert to the possibility that the conclusion was wrong.

The inner harmony that is manifested in reverence is an emotional, rather than a rational condition. "The reverent soul remembers how to feel what it ought to feel about itself and about other people" (Woodruff 2001, 88). This quality, it seems to me is not just expressed in the discipline of self-control. It is an inner instinct capable of monitoring the complex feelings arising in my social relationships that incline me to do the right thing. I need to expand my emotional vocabulary to bring this process to greater consciousness.

A reverential attitude of inquiry then requires attention not just to thinking and acting, but feeling, thinking and acting. There is a simplicity about this that embraces the contradictions and conflicts of a relationship, learning to forgive the reality for what it has become and accepting my own complicity in creating it. I concluded the last chapter by recognising the need to attend to feelings as a crucial measure of my relationship to what is going on in the world. This has deepened through this chapter into a vital quality of relational inquiry, embracing the other with humility, recognising I cannot fully know but must fully engage.

This is a virtue that was to be severely tested in the final cycle of my inquiry.



## Chapter Five

### I Listen to the Wind and the Wind Tells Me what to Do

*We are in the middle of our stories and cannot be sure how they will end; we are constantly having to revise the plot as new events are added to our lives. Self, then, is not a static thing or a substance, but a configuring of personal events into a historical unity, which includes not only what one has been but also anticipations of what one will be.*

(Polkinghorne 1988)

*God, grant me the serenity  
To accept the things I cannot change;  
The courage to change the things I can;  
And the wisdom to know the difference.*  
(Reinhold Niebuhr in a sermon ca. 1942)

At this stage of my journey let me hold a finger on the pause button to assess the progress I have made. I have surprised myself as the thesis has emerged. It is quite different from the one I imagined when I began this journey six years ago. Traces of that vision remain, like threads through the cloth, but other threads have joined it, woven by circumstance and unexpected connections, offering their creative influence on my way of being in the world. I continue to live with Schon's (1983) notion of 'backtalk'. I cannot participate in the world without its reality clinging to me and influencing my actions. If I ignore its speech I stomp on its fragile promises and become more isolated and alone. If I pay attention, it pushes against my blindness and prejudice, potentially opening me up to greater resonance. But have



I traced the path adequately? How did my inquiry affect its development and how did its development affect my inquiry? I am learning to live with questions, and even celebrate the way they keep life moving.

I intend to begin this chapter with some reflections on what I have learned from taking an attitude of inquiry to my practice and how this began to shape my work as a programme leader and learning facilitator of post-graduate students. I remind the reader that I began this inquiry with a technical/rational interest in improving the provision of post-graduate professional education and with the assumption that this would lead to the introduction of a number of improved techniques and learning strategies. Instead it has resulted in a radical shift in my approach to professional learning in ways that I will explore in the first half of this chapter.

My initial attempts at Action Inquiry were like the early practice of scales on the piano, requiring focal attention on what I was doing with my eye, my ears and my hands, struggling to register what was going on, noticing what I hadn't seen before and the different insights that came from different forms of capture (memory, journal, audio recording, etc). I am still aware that attention is not something I can fully control. I am always subject to distraction. But I am more relaxed now. I realise that the one attending (me) is a unique instrument. I am attending through the filters of my history, culture, interests and motivations, known and unknown. Sometimes I catch something from the corner of my eye, or the edge of a conversation and begin to explore its significance. "The more our society moves towards specialization," Mary Catherine Bateson (1994) says, "the more women and men alike are forced to focus on single activities, living in narrow channels. Yet there are many reasons why less narrow attention, more peripheral vision, offers richer and more responsible living" (1994, 100). This requires skills of attention to what is off the radar screen of most social science research, on the fuzzy edges of perception. It is no small surprise that conventional research methods are unable to handle this irregular and ephemeral data (Law 2004).

Bateson suggests a way of describing my experience of practice centred learning as "hit and miss epiphanies" (1994, 115). My antennae were alert to critical events as potential moments of understanding. They were often random and occasional, many potentially rich with meaning but apparently unconnected to each other or a wider plot. Now, as I enter this stage of my inquiry, Bateson offers a way of seeing the link between those rare moments of insight and the gradual changes in my practice - what she calls 'longitudinal epiphanies' (ibid). The link is found in the notion of practice as in playing a musical instrument, riding a bicycle or praying; the outcome of repeating "the same action over and over, attentively, mindfully, in a way that makes possible a gradual ... process of change" (ibid). I am learning to give attention to longer wavelengths of meaning and to embrace the inconclusive, making do "with partial understandings ... learning to savor (sic) the vertigo of doing without answers" (ibid, 9).

Marshall (2004) talks of knowing when to persist and when to desist. I see this as a spiritual insight. Elijah the prophet, battered by his confrontation with the religious authorities, had wandered into the desert alone and in despair, with only an angel to comfort him (I Kings 19). Suddenly the earth shook beneath him. But God was not in the earthquake, the wind, or the fire, the major cataclysmic 'events' of his desert experience. He was found in the quiet whisper ('the sound of sheer silence' as one translation expresses it). The encounter led to a new vocation in which he was to anoint a new king and a new prophet, Elisha, with the assurance that there were 7,000 others who, unknown to him, had remained faithful. So he was not alone and it was now time to pass the baton. When he did find God he also found himself and discovered he was part of a new community. Attention, in the first stages of my inquiry into critical incidents (as I tended to call them) focussed on the noisy and visible events. I now realise that some may have been distractions. Sometimes the significant is conveyed in quiet whispers.

As I write this thesis I am coming to see my inquiries in a different light. In my initial planning I saw the structure in three movements, roughly coinciding with three cycles of learning now presented in chapters three, four and this one, chapter

five. Like Brendan returning to the Island of White Birds, my journey brought me back to the same place but as a different person, able to see my experience in a different way. The winds and waves of professional life have conspired to take me on this circuitous route to learn more about myself and the environment in which I work, almost as if this is an essential process on the way to the Land of Promise. Each time the cycle has climaxed in a deeply personal experience, exposing aspects of myself as an actor in the world that were at first uncomfortable and yet lead to a deeper sense of integrity and presence. Each turning point was a spiritual experience, accompanied by the singing of the most beautiful white birds. There is a deep irony in the music performed by these spirits condemned to remain on earth because, in the ancient conflict between the angels of light and dark, they refused to take sides (Matthews 1998, 11). There is a mystery here that remains to be fathomed, hinting at a fundamental unity that lies beyond the opposites of light and dark, and promising a discernment that comes from such apparent ambiguity.

In this, the third movement of my journey, I will explore a number of more recent events in my professional life as my responsibilities shifted and the work moved into a more public arena, institutionally and academically. As my inquiries continued I became aware that my actions are shaped, not just by my own reflective practices but by the institutional structures in which I work. These are subtle and easily misjudged. Self-awareness and awareness of institutional realities cannot be considered as independent cognitive processes - one the focus of personal reflection and the other objective analysis. My institutional setting is both an external influence on my practice and the context in which I practice and therefore, to some extent, responsive to my action. Innovation in these systems can be disruptive and in the following pages I will describe my practice in navigating these quite turbulent waters. I am learning the art of paying attention to the choices I am making in managing these processes as the system seeks new equilibrium by either rejecting or embracing my intervention.

This chapter will explore the dynamics between the fluid politics of quotidian practice and the rigid boundaries of institutional culture and policy and offer a

learning narrative of my experience of its colonising pressures and, eventually, its action to shut down the space in which I worked. It led to the unexpected termination of a working relationship I had enjoyed for almost 20 years and the threat of premature retirement. While this experience proved crucial to my search for integrity and presence, for almost a year I was unable to write this part of the story. It was too close, too painful.

## **When a Teacher Becomes a Learner**

But first, I intend to go back and to reflect on what I was learning from my inquiries around the provision of post-graduate education and the changes that emerged from this process. Some were quite substantial, as for example, the development of what we called an “Integrative Strand” which ran in parallel with the modules and was designed to develop deeper and more holistic approaches to learning. The strand represented 40% of the assessment in Part One. This caused problems with the validating university who couldn't understand how to recognise this work in the standard modular structure of the Masters, a problem we overcame by re-writing the module assessments to require evidence of the use of the integrative strand skills. This approach had the support of the External Examiner, however, who encouraged us to develop more synoptic assessment processes.

On a weekly basis, we convened a student-led seminar at which they presented the results of the assignments they had completed in the study units. Some were individual. Others were collaborative. At the end of the study unit on media ethics, for example, we asked the entire cohort to work together to draft a code of practice for media journalism, negotiating each entry with the rest of the group. The result was published on the Institute website and then used by the students individually to write up an explanation of what they would do when faced with a particular professional dilemma (several cases were offered).

When reflecting back on the course during the exit interviews<sup>27</sup> one student singled out this activity. "It was a very good process, for example, when we had to come up with a code of practice together. Group dynamics are not always easy. It is hard to get people involved but it was really good when we got going." The seminar process is formative not summative, yet it often attracted greater enthusiasm than the course modules and formal assessments. One student said, during their exit interview, "The Integrative Strand was more relevant and more personal to me. The modular assessments were harder because they were more theoretical." Another commented, "the non-assessed work was good...I found if I got behind that I missed it."

On another occasion I arranged a student-led, half day symposium on "how I relate my personal values to my work as a media professional". The students were asked to organise the event and decide how they would like to present the session. They could work collaboratively or alone. They also took responsibility for announcing the symposium to the wider members of the Centre. I personally encouraged faculty from other disciplines to attend.

The group started by presenting a "live" radio talk show, modelled on Radio Four's "Midweek", one student acting as host with the others participating as guests. The conversation was lively and the contributions often quite personal. It quickly established the very different attitudes and cultural experiences in the group. One student presented a powerpoint outline with examples from his experience. Two others engaged in a heated dialogue, taking sides on whether personal values should be excluded from professional practice or not.

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<sup>27</sup> At the beginning of the Masters project we used a conventional course evaluation form to solicit feedback from the students. It soon became clear that this was inadequate and we added an exit interview, involving the student, the Quality Enhancement Officer, and myself as Programme Leader. These conversations, lasting between 30 and 45 minutes, provided opportunity to explore issues that didn't surface on the evaluation forms.

I spoke to both students and faculty after the symposium. One member of the faculty who taught on the communication course noticed quite different things about the students from what had been observed in the classroom. Although it involved quite a bit of preparation the students appreciated the opportunity to work together and what they had learned from each other. One student recalled the experience during his exit interview several months later. "I took my religion for granted back home, so to be asked "how do my personal values influence my professional practice" was a question I really struggled with. Perhaps this was the most important thing I did this year. It changed my way of thinking." A Kenyan student, said, "The integrative strand added a lot of value to the course. I had never heard of reflective thinking before I came on this course. I now see it as essential. It has become the bolt that holds theory and practice together. It was very good. You don't find this in other courses." An Ethiopian student added, "The best part was thinking reflectively. This was new to me. I expect to learn from my mistakes but this was something more intentional and regular. Reflection in action and on action is all very helpful. This has not been a key component of my work as a journalist." A Korean confessed, "I found my vocation on this course."

As these experiences accumulated, several convictions began to surface in my way of thinking about professional learning. It was encouraging to see students becoming aware of the importance of questioning whether their practice was consistent with their principles and beginning to assess the outcome of their actions in relation to some common good. They were "becoming authors of their own practice," a phrase I adapted from McGonagill (2000) and subsequently discovered in Shotter (1993, 155-157). My own practice, as a learning facilitator, was being stretched and I began to use a different language to describe the conditions that enabled this kind of learning.

Significantly, for me, what was emerging in my practice was contrary to many of the traditional approaches to adult learning - what Vaill (1996) calls "institutional learning." When I first developed the curriculum and began teaching at the Master's level I took for granted the prevailing notion that the student had enrolled

in the programme to acquire knowledge that had been created by formal research and was held in institutional repositories. Teaching, therefore, involved the transmission of this knowledge in locations set apart from ordinary life, and learning was assessed by standards set by the custodians of this knowledge. At a superficial level this made sense. There is no need for each individual to re-invent the wheel in converting inches to centimetres when learning a simple formula will do, and it is essential for someone else, besides the driver, to set the standards for driving competence. But the transmission model of teaching and learning quickly became unsustainable in the light of my experience. As the formulas and theories that were designed to help interpret reality become the lenses through which we look, we can miss other variables in the landscape that, in particular situations, may be relevant.

Reference to the particular is important. Most formulas and theories are attempts at claiming universal validity. Human life is experienced in different interconnected systems - personal, domestic, organisational, social, political and economic. While there are levels of interconnection between these systems their configuration and interaction is unique and dynamic for each individual and each situation.

Practitioners already have implicit knowledge of this complex field and they bring this into the learning experience. They know more than anyone else about their practice. It may not be conscious or clearly articulated but it shapes their daily practice. They “know more than they can tell” (Polanyi 1977). The learning process should, therefore, enable them to give form to this knowledge, to find ways of expressing it (moving from experiential to presentational knowing (Heron 1996)) so that they can engage critically with it, and relate it to the knowledge of others. As I listened to my students I quickly came to realise that programmes of professional learning need to recognise the practitioner as an expert.

This has consequences, not only for the learning process but also for assessment. Rather than asking the general question, “what qualities should a graduate exhibit?” I began to place the learner at the centre of the assessment regime, enabling them to negotiate forms of assessment that give a sufficient or

appropriate account of their professional development. This makes the assessment process the subject of collaborative inquiry involving the participant, his or her peers, and the programme leadership. As authors of their own practice the assessment portfolio is, therefore, likely to include evidence derived from their professional environment and testimony as to its quality from peers and employers.

I am reminded of HP, an early student on the MA in Communications Practice, who struggled to find the time to complete his Part Two dissertation after returning to his work as an assignment editor with a TV News Channel in a major city in the USA. As a part of his responsibility on-the-job, he produced a documentary that won him an Emmy nomination for best television feature. In telling me the story of this project he gave an account of professional judgement and courage that brought social and economic benefit to his audience, and appreciation from his industry. The skill he evidenced in managing himself in this situation is a characteristic of professionalism that is difficult to assess by conventional means. It can only be recognised through what Della Fish calls “critical appreciation” - seeing practice as artistry and assessing with the eyes of an appreciative critic (Fish 1998). It seems to me that, rather than insisting on the conventional form of MA dissertation, it was more appropriate for him to submit the documentary, his critical reflection on the production process, and evidence of recognition by his peers, for assessment.

## **Finding a Language for Learning**

My experience with the Master’s programmes was also leading me to experiment with my teaching style as some of the stories in this thesis illustrate. Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner (2007), in their encyclopedic survey of *Learning in Adulthood*, conclude that adult learning should be distinguished from learning in childhood, claiming that “the configuration of learner, context, and process together makes learning in adulthood distinctly different from learning in



childhood" (2007, 423). I would argue that this perspective obscures the continuities, particularly if we consider the following.

Each of us are born with what I have come to call "natural learning dispositions"<sup>28</sup> like wonder and curiosity, sensuality and imagination. These are most evident in the child - inquisitive, playful and creative. Institutional learning often denies the opportunity for these dispositions to serve us in later life. Hammond asks the question, "If we are all born with the ability to discover the secrets of the universe why do so many children lose this love of learning; this infinite capacity to wonder and urge to question and explore?" (Hammond 2008). Releasing the childlike qualities of curiosity (alertness to our surroundings), creativity (playfulness and imagination), sensuality (touching, tasting and smelling as well as listening and looking), participation (involvement with the focus of attention) and innocence (a trustful openness to learn from any source) could transform professional learning. The natural learning dispositions don't recognise convention. They innocently question the "mental models" (Argyris 1999, Senge 1993) that channel thought, encouraging an attitude of inquiry towards the "paradigmatic, structuring assumptions" (Brookfield 1995) that otherwise limit professional choice. It was Jesus who said that we must become again like a child, to enter the kingdom.

Natural learning dispositions are shy and fragile and need a safe place to flourish. Yet they can quickly recover when given the opportunity. Yorks (2005) refers to the work of the Japanese philosopher Kitaro Nishida who first proposed the importance of a socially shared space in learning - what he called *ba* (which is roughly translated as "place"). This is similar to Torbert's liberating structure (1991), a generative space that "is social more than physical, in nature, and its creation is organic and evolutionary, not formulaic" (Yorks 2005, 1231). Information may be passed on in the traditional classroom setting. Practical knowledge, on the other hand, needs a safe and stimulating environment in order

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<sup>28</sup> Dewey (1933) wrote about "the body of habits, of active dispositions which make a man do what he does" (Dewey quoted in Ritchhart 2002, 19). For further discussion on learning dispositions see Ritchhart (2002).

to emerge. I can imagine, in time, these environments becoming a feature of the workplace as “communities of practice” (Wenger 1999) become communities of inquiry (Friedman 2001). Their power will lie in their ability to liberate the natural learning dispositions of their members.

This kind of generative space is not empty, like a playground, for the limitless imagination of the child. It has a narrative purpose. Candler (2006), in a thought provoking discussion of theological writing in the medieval period, provides an analogy for this practice. He contrasts what he calls “the grammar of representation” which he associates with modernity and “the grammar of participation” that preceded it. Attempts to catalogue and organise knowledge, to produce a panoptic, encyclopedic view of knowledge, arose with the printing press and the development of various aids - tables of content, indexes and the like - to provide access to the knowledge enclosed within the covers of a book. This reorganisation of typographical space entailed a parallel rearrangement of mental space (Ong in Candler 2006, 13) and separated the source of knowledge from the situation of learning. Before this, learning was a collegial experience. By re-introducing the medieval notion of “manuduction” Candler suggests that the culture of participation created a pedagogy of shared experience - the learner being led by the hand (*manus*) along an itinerary (*ductus*) towards a purposeful end (*skopos*). In other words, the learning process had a narrative, forward moving shape, in the company of others. The temporary liberating structures we organised in the Masters programmes had this manuductive purpose.

In this sense I agree with Howard Gardner (1993). The creativity required in professional life involves more than the maturing of a childlike sense of wonder and imaginative action. Gardner argues that creativity requires first mastering a particular domain. This is distinct, I suggest, from the traditional disciplines or domains of knowledge that are recognised by the academy with their own methodologies and language. Mastery of this kind of knowledge leads to increasing specialisation and isolation. The field of practice, however, cannot be so neatly dissected and is in constant flux. Rather than seeking universal knowledge

about less and less we could pursue the whole in the particular. And this is what the practitioner does. His/her pre-occupation is better described as “specific” rather than “specialised.” The practitioner wants to understand what is in front of them at the moment. “Whatever happens is the curriculum,” to borrow a phrase from Howe (1974, 57). Mastery, in this sense, requires a different set of skills than the methods adopted by an academic discipline. Instead of focusing on the memorisation of “subject matter” professional learning needs to attend to the skills required to handle knowledge that is fluid and help the individual make meaningful, purposeful and moral decisions in the moment.

This is not to deny the value of academic knowledge to the practitioner. He or she can draw valuable insight from the social sciences, but it is not the purpose of the practitioner to add to this knowledge. In a context of substantial and rapid change, the knowledge already codified in conceptual claims and theoretical frameworks can become themselves tools for further inquiry, serving like lenses for closer investigation, or as “conceptual prosthetics” (Shotter 1993). Freire (1990) describes his own experience of reading words and reading the world, recommending that students do the same; “It has to do with reading the *text* in order to understand the *context*” (Horton & Freire 1990, 31).

And it is necessary, of course, for a practitioner to talk about their professional activity in language that is understood in the profession and their learning experience should, therefore, include a critical induction into the prevailing discourse of the field. I say “critical,” because we now know how language itself operates as a source of power and control and the dominant discourse may need to be challenged in the learner’s context.

Central to professional learning, then, is the need to develop an attitude of critical inquiry to both the body of knowledge that shapes the practice and the daily experience of that practice. This involves the acquisition and use of a variety of tools of inquiry that collectively I have called “holistic learning disciplines” that can only be acquired with practice. They include, for example, the skills of attention

(Mason 2002, Marshall 2001), critical reflection (Schon 1983) and action inquiry (Torbert 2004), and the regular use of learning journals, critical incident analysis, and other practices. The holistic learning disciplines provide a suite of tools with which to probe experience, situate it in its wider systemic context, and act upon what is learned. This is an essential feature of professional learning, ensuring that practitioners emerge from their learning experience as agile entrepreneurs and not just functional bureaucrats, capable of navigating the unstructured and unpredictable environment in which they work.

Working with these ideas I began to realise that, while the professional context may vary, the holistic learning disciplines were essentially the same. It therefore became possible to think of a generic programme in which the curriculum was determined by the participants' professional experience, providing opportunity to develop the holistic learning disciplines in a supportive, purposeful environment that set free the curiosity and creativity of the natural learning dispositions. So, building on the experience of the early years of the Master's programme, I began to dream of creating a programme that built intentionally on these core pillars of professional learning - providing the generative space for the natural learning dispositions to flourish and the holistic learning disciplines to mature. This, it seemed to me, would help develop heightened skills of observation and self-questioning, leading to a deeper awareness of the sociocultural reality shaping professional practice and nurturing the capacity to transform that reality (Freire 1970).

## **Into the Mainstream**

In the Spring of 2005 the institution made the decision to terminate MA provision, focussing this resource on the research degrees programme, and mandating the development of a Master's programme that would facilitate professional development in the non-western world with course delivery as close as possible to the demand. It was expected that this would achieve two major benefits. By

organising delivery in country, students would avoid the fees and costs of UK based provision and, by enabling students to remain in employment, they would be able to relate their studies more directly to their field of practice.

I was invited to head up the project, working with partners in Africa and Asia, the core faculty and the administration. The goal was to create a common framework and shared platform, while respecting the uniqueness of different contexts. The market for the new award was defined in terms of the emerging generation of professionals in the non-western world, eager to invest their time and energy in eradicating poverty and building their national economy or social capital. I was thrilled with the opportunity and daunted by the task. Having spent many years working in these cultures I was aware of the very different constituencies we would have to serve - partner institutions, sponsors, validating authorities, faculty, students and employers. I wrote in my journal at the time:

"I will need the spirit of affirmative inquiry in large doses - perhaps this needs to be a key element of growth on my personal path. This is not the only challenge I face. It is essential that partner institutions find ownership of the project from the beginning, requiring us to set up a collaborative inquiry processes across wide geographical distances."

Several questions shaped my approach to the new programme. How might it facilitate the professional development of the participants (a pedagogical question)? How might it serve employers by aligning staff development and organisational mission (a strategic question)? How might it operate as a learning organisation itself (a management question)? And, how might it serve the purpose of the institution? At the time I did not realise how difficult this question would prove to be. In the programme reorganisation the Board had set a goal to widen participation and double the number of student enrolments over the next five years. At the time the management culture was permissive and although I was in a middle management position, coping with top-down and bottom-up demands, I had a lot of freedom.

The major uncertainty was funding. The institution was dependent on core funding from Germany, Scandinavia and the USA as well as the UK and this new vision would take some time to attract the necessary resources. With the ending of the residential Masters programme the Dean was anxious to secure my role in the institution in the meantime. As a part of my portfolio, therefore, I was invited to serve as Stage Leader for the research degree programme, with responsibility to manage incoming research students through to their registration with the university. In this role I was given a seat on the Research Degrees Committee and, subsequently, to my surprise, was elected by the faculty onto the Academic Standards Committee. I had moved into the institutional mainstream. One of my first tasks was to organise the Research Induction School - an experience reported elsewhere in this thesis. I introduced a number of changes, based on what I had learned from the Masters programmes, moving away from traditional lectures to open space, student-led learning. I created an online environment where students could develop their own glossary of difficult words and ideas, for example, and rather than include a lecture series on the history of ideas, I set up an activity in which the students were asked to critique and revise the Wikipedia entry on "Intellectual History." I suggested that this had several benefits. It would require the students to study the topic for themselves and help them develop a critical perspective on Wikipedia as a source. Some of these changes were accepted without dispute but I soon began to experience opposition to my attempts to open up the epistemological space. In the relatively safe environment of the Masters programme the positivist culture of the research faculty had little influence. Now they were my colleagues.

In my new role I was also involved in admissions and quickly realised that many of the applicants had a professional, rather than academic background, and their research interests arose out of their professional experience. This raised concerns on the Admissions Committee. "She's too close to her topic," was a common comment, often accompanied with a question about whether she would be able to take an objective position in order to do research. There was a comment at the top of one application form, "Scope and method are at present hopelessly unclear,

showing that the applicant has not made any leap from programmatic rhetoric to academic enquiry.”

As the students arrived to begin their research these questions became part of some very personal journeys in which I became involved. My journal entries over this period are peppered with reflections on my conversations with students and my frustration at the expectation that their research question fit the conventional methodologies of the academic disciplines. An experienced community development worker from Kenya, for example, was really excited about the possibility of Action Research on his work in the Dandora and Kibera slums. After several months working with his mentor, however, his research emerged as an inquiry into the role and contribution of Christian faith based organisations to the UN Millennium Development Goals in Kenya. I encouraged a social activist and pastor from Zambia with a passion to address the HIV/Aids crisis in his country to research his own interventions in the crisis but he was persuaded instead to study the impact of existing intervention strategies in the country. Something was happening in the mentoring process that I found uncomfortable. I had begun to dream of an alternative research pathway for practitioners that would facilitate rigorous inquiry into their practice in ways that would channel and deepen their passion to make a difference in the world.

A research student from Nagaland in NE India had enrolled to study forgiveness. In his first seminar presentation he outlined a theological framework of the topic and was challenged to include an empirical component to his inquiry. I sat with him over lunch at which he shared his personal story. His uncle had been killed in the ethnic conflict and he was concerned that these experiences had paralysed his community and they were unable to move on. He wanted to help them forgive. He recognised the value of including an ethnographic element in his research but several times he said that he didn't know whether he would be able to interview the perpetrators of the violence. I responded, "This was the third time I have heard you say that you were not sure whether you would interview them. Let's be practical - would you shake their hands, or not? If so, I think your research may be

in that handshake." The study would then be an inquiry into the fall out of this action, I suggested. How would it be received? Would it lead others to forgive? Would it affect his acceptance within his own community? How would his community talk about the violence after this act? I suggested that this action would deepen his knowledge far beyond any theological reflection and encouraged him to consider an action research approach. Perhaps he could set up a collaborative inquiry. Could he recruit a group prepared to experiment with action for change - to pray for their enemies, to walk past a house they have avoided for ten years, for example - deciding on a course of action, sharing what happened, making sense of it collectively and deciding on further action? At first he hesitated, weighing up the personal consequences of this level of participation in the issue. I suggested some material for him to read and some weeks later he came back to say that he was now ready to pursue it. The definition of action research offered by Reason and Bradbury in the introduction to the Handbook of Action Research (2001) was, he said, exactly what he wanted to do.

To succeed as a post-graduate programme this approach to research would need to be accredited by the wider academy. The normal route for this, as a private institution, is through external validation by a UK university. The Centre already had 120 students enrolled in a MPhil/PhD programme validated by a large regional university. While it may have been possible to present practitioners for registration on this programme our initial discussions with the university were disappointing. The disciplinary silos of traditional research were dominant and the regulations fairly rigid. Residence requirements and supervision structures would be difficult to modify to meet the demands of professional life. It was clear that the new programme would need a new university relationship. There were several prospects but one quickly emerged as the preferred option. Our ideas came to the attention of the Pro-Vice Chancellor for Learning and Teaching at a university with a particular profile in serving business and the professions. As we explored the options available she saw the opportunity of introducing a university-wide PhD in Professional Practice as an alternative to the subject specific Professional Doctorates that had proliferated in recent years (the award was approved by



University Senate in September 2006). This development provided us with the opportunity of presenting external students for registration on a University recognised doctoral programme. The benefits to us were that, while taking responsibility for the academic preparation of candidates for examination by the university, we would not need to go through the detailed and costly process of external validation. Although, for the time being the Masters project was postponed, we had established a positive working relationship with the university that was formally recognised in a Memorandum of Understanding and a public launch in November 2007.

Several research students already enrolled at the Centre choose this path. We branded the new initiative the 4P - the Post-graduate Programme in Professional Practice - and began marketing. Within four months we had 20 candidates lined up to register on the new programme. The Associate Dean in the School of Community and Health Sciences was appointed as Director of Studies to handle academic relations and we were encouraged to adopt a work-based learning model that was being promoted in the university. Work based learning (Boud and Solomon 2001) is a broad, transdisciplinary innovation in higher education that recognises the workplace, or the work process (Boreham 2004) as the location and subject of inquiry.

While continuing to navigate our own institutional systems we were now relating to a new university administration and starting to engage with their well established academic frameworks. I wrote in my journal:

“These are deeper waters. I sense that we have moved away from the sheltered coastal waters of our homeland. I am becoming aware of multiple connections and conscious that participation in these larger systems is not always clear ... I am aware of the need to take a systemic view of the ways in which I navigate my professional landscape, giving critical attention to my own action ... in the light of the dynamic nature of the systems in which we have become involved.”

## Navigating Systems

Senge (1993) talks of “learning disabilities” that arise from our failure to think systemically. In my early days of teaching management for media practitioners I treated systems like a black box with inputs and outputs (possibly influenced by my training as an engineer). When I then invited students to peer into the box I found the Tushman and Nadler (1996) model of organisational behaviour a useful curriculum tool. While the model helpfully identifies the interacting processes *within* the organisation it isolates these processes from the wider systems of which it is a part, and treats the environment as an input with properties that can influence the system, rather than as a larger system. While it can be argued that it may be necessary to reduce the complexity of the whole by isolating and examining the “system-in-focus” (Beer 1991) this tendency to attend to the parts, rather than the whole, betrayed a taken for granted loyalty to acquiring knowledge by analysis.

Systems thinking, however, is not just a way of understanding and solving problems but a language with which to think and communicate. A participative epistemology views these networks, not in the traditional hierarchies of organisational structure but as emergent processes. The new partnership with the university would lead to new systems and the reconstruction of existing ones, not as a formal process, but through the collective experience of new situations. While every system has its formal structures - committees, hierarchies of decision making, etc, - I discovered that participating in the systems that emerged to facilitate our new relationship was a largely informal process. We quickly established a high level of trust so that, although we had established a Liaison Committee to coordinate the relationship, most of the detailed procedures were handled through conversations and email. I came to value these as a vital tool in this process, although institutions also need a paper trail of committee decisions for quality assurance purposes.

The Director of Studies was very supportive of the project and quickly offered to organise and host a workshop to introduce our students to the university. The following account of the event began as freefall writing in my journal:

The lighting in the room is depressing, a sign on the wall informing us that the system is under repair. Our host is welcoming but the haphazard layout of the furniture in the room adds to our initial unease. The first speaker is delayed - a phone call to our host indicates that she has gone to the wrong room. Then, when the projector is switched on nothing works and minutes tick by as we wait for a technician to arrive. This is the first workshop offered by the University to our recruits for the PhD in Professional Practice. Six aspiring researchers wait to hear how the programme will work and what is expected of them.

The first speaker is a respected action researcher working in palliative care. She distributes a variety of papers and a bibliography and opens the session up for discussion. She sits on the edge of her chair, her body leaning forward, arms open, as she speaks with enthusiasm about her views of action research. Her posture makes the room feel brighter and everyone seems involved. Unfortunately she has to leave quite abruptly for another meeting and the second contributor is introduced - an internal PhD candidate in the final stages of writing up her research. We all expect to hear about her experience as a researcher in the university but instead we receive a summary of her research which did not seem to have an action research element, and although the topic was relevant to one of the participants there was little interaction. A short presentation on "writing for publication" brings the morning session to a close.

After lunch, hosted by the university, the group is given a tour of the main campus and then settles down for a session to discuss their research interests with the Director of Studies. I had been invited to sit in on the workshop and appreciate the opportunity to hear from the presenters and listen to their

interaction. I am aware that my presence could influence the process. I have spent a lot of time with these students in previous weeks and am familiar with their ideas. This was their first time at the University and, for some, an anxious moment.

The Director of Studies is confident in her handling of the discussion. "I look first at your methodology", she tells the participants, "so when writing your proposal give attention to this - and to your literature review." I wonder whether to add a comment to question this requirement, since we have emphasised the emergent nature of practitioner research in the Induction School and downplayed the traditional way of preparing a research proposal, but I remain silent. A participant volunteers a brief description of her research interest. "So your question is a what question", the Director of Studies responds, "not a how or a why question. Take a look at Appreciative Inquiry - what is working now, as your base line." Someone else talks about their work and is told, "your question is a how question - how do I improve myself? You want to institute change but you are not using change words - you are using comparative words, reflective words."

The next day we gather back at the Centre to debrief. I sense some anxiety as the participants begin to share. There are concerns in understanding the epistemological issues and in relating their faith to their inquiry. "I came away from the university quite scared," one participant comments. "I don't think I can do this," another one offers, "I have been so immersed in my Christian culture that I don't think I will be able to think critically about it in a language that will be acceptable to the university. I'm not clever enough to pull this off." Another had framed her professional work as a counsellor for the terminally ill in terms of "a divine mandate." She is now worried whether this was appropriate. "Of course it is," another participant replies, "you can tell your own story" (April 2008).

The workshop was a temporary system in itself, partly designed to explore the relationships between the institutions and individuals. I was conscious of its importance in shaping my relationship with the Director of Studies and the students were clearly involved in making sense of their future relationship with the university. My own sense making, following the debriefing with the students, centred on the expectations for a clear research proposal and methodology. I had invited another member the faculty to sit in on the workshop at the university and I ran into him a couple of days later. Standing in the hallway, interrupted several times by others as they passed us, I told him what had happened in the debriefing following the workshop. I wondered out loud about the Director of Studies' preoccupation with methodology and the rather functional way in which reflective practice had been presented. The conversation lasted about ten minutes but it was long enough for me to verbalise my feelings and to receive, in his nods and responses, a clear sense of what to do next. Perhaps, I suggested, reflective practice has become so commonplace in the nursing profession (the Director of Studies was the professor of Advanced Nursing Practice) that it had settled into a portfolio of methods, just like the positivist traditions it sought be free of. It was clear that I needed to discuss this with the Director of Studies before our students submitted their applications as external students.

This experience triggers several reflections. Following Boje (2001), my account of the workshop has a speculative character, inviting the question "what is going on here?" rather than giving an answer. He calls this "antenarrative" - that which is before narrative. It is in a state of "coming to be", waiting for a plot. The plot, I suggest, emerges as I bring it together with the account of my casual conversation several days later, and begin, in my writing, to think *with* the story. Secondly, my sense making occurred in conversation, helping me bring my feelings to verbal expression. This was not a mental process. Following Wittgenstein I understood in the sense that I knew what to do next<sup>29</sup>. I was not making sense *of* the experience. Rather, sense-making was part of the experience that enabled me to move on. It

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<sup>29</sup> I was first alerted to this insight from Wittgenstein by the Dean. I later came across the reference in Shotter (1993, 103).

doesn't matter whether my interpretation (that reflective practice has become commonplace in nursing education) is correct. What happened was that I reached a place where I could say "Now I can go on." Through the conversation I came to "know" what I needed to do, even though this was not fully articulated in the verbal exchange. The value of such conversations is not in creating common sense for its own purpose but in shaping the future action of its participants.

This places a conversation at the heart of the story. Lacking a panoptic view of the complex systems within which I live and work I must resort to conversational tactics that seek a collaborative way forward. Conversations are not, fundamentally, intellectual activities. Referring to Shotter, Shaw (2002) describes the experience as an immersion:

"in a sensuous flow of patterned feeling, a kind of ethos in which words "in their speaking" have the power to "move" or "arrest" us, shift our perceptions and actions because we are communicating as intelligent bodies ... These tendencies cannot be wholly grasped in mental representations, rather as we converse we "give form to feeling", so that what at first is a mere felt tendency can be eventually realized as a new form of organization and eventually social institution" (Shaw 2002, 51-52).

Schon describes conversation as "collective verbal improvisation" (1987, 30). Improvisation, not just in the sense of what is unrehearsed, but of what is essentially unpremeditated and unpredictable. There is something about conversations that is continually destabilising. Just as a temporary equilibrium is found that reduces the exchange to momentary silence, a further intervention tilts the balance. Conversation bring surprises and changes of direction leading Shaw to describes it as a delightful and disturbing experience "like someone always off balance and continuing to stay upright only by moving" (Shaw 2002, 114). Participation is an exhilarating experience of discovery, leaning into the unknown. Sentences begin before we know how they will end, letting go of what was previously known in order to enter the unknown. The future is not "there" to be

discovered but is formed in the exploration itself. "It is difficult to map ground that moves with every step of the explorers" (Shaw 2002, 141).

Conversation, then, is a fundamental form of social inquiry, a purposeful probing of the system or a testing of its boundaries and as the project developed I become increasingly aware of its role in changing systems.

## **Management by Grenade**

The discussion so far suggests a rather benign view of systems, serving human purposes and responding to interventions of various kinds. Inevitably, however, the intentions of its participants can conflict, exposing the power that sustains them, and at times leaving the system dysfunctional or paralysed. As the practitioner programme developed the Dean was keen to keep the Academic Standards Committee involved and in one of my first meetings I was asked to present the plans for the new programme. Almost as soon as I had finished my presentation it was attacked by the external member of the Committee, a respected Oxford scholar. She complained of the erosion of academic standards and the intrusion of American style practitioner training into the university. The ferocity of her response reminded me of the arguments of the early 20th century when the University of Chicago decided to create a business school that resulted in what Schon calls the Veblenian bargain (Schon 1995). Thorsten Veblen had vigorously opposed the establishment of a business school in the university, arguing that this would undermine its role as a centre of research and scholarship. I did not want a similar compromise to result from this discussion, separating a programme of "higher learning" rooted in scholarly research from the "lower" task of preparing practitioners for professional practice, in which they learned to apply scientific knowledge to the instrumental problems of practice.

I was aware of an ambivalence in the response of the others in the group. One was concerned that the award would not be respected in Asia, another that it was

designed for a different market than the traditional programme and we had no experience in this field. After the meeting the Dean explained that the Director had been worried about the reaction of some members of faculty to my election onto the Committee and this had influenced his contribution to the discussion. The meeting approved the continued development of the project but I left it aware that an intra-preneur needs to navigate the political waters of their own organisation with skill and patience. Many of the forces at work in the systems we inhabit are unspoken and invisible.

Two months later I was invited to present the project to the Board. It was a very warm late June afternoon and the room in which we were meeting had become quite hot before I joined the discussion. The Director almost immediately caught me by surprise by introducing a sceptical note about the project, questioning the wisdom of working with UK Universities and recommending that, instead, the Centre focus on organising the content and quality standards for programmes delivered and validated locally. He was also critical of the viability and fees. He misquoted the fees we had agreed in budgeting and simply did not feel there would be a demand for the programme. When I responded to offer evidence of a very positive response from the potential market he claimed superior awareness; "I get around a lot more than you and I don't think anyone would be interested in this."

He referred to a partner in Indonesia, claiming that they no longer needed the western academy. This was not quite true. The partner did want to work with a western university but travel restrictions by the validating university meant that the field visit could not go ahead making it impossible to conclude the validation. The Dean referred to a partner in Zimbabwe who had completed the validation process and then withdrawn on the basis that they wanted to set up the programme with University of Zimbabwe validation. The Dean had just received an email from them in the previous couple of weeks asking if the Centre could help them gain international approval because their graduates were not being recognised.



The Director changed his line of argument, complaining that we had lost focus on the Masters by talk of a doctoral programme and that we had also been distracted by orientation towards 'practice' as the platform for reflection. By this time I was boiling inside. He talked about his recent experience with a group of journalists, stating that ethics cannot be hijacked by journalists working with a simplistic rights-based framework. Ethics must be built on moral theology, not practice. I remained silent, sensing that there was little point in arguing.

He warmed to his central point. "We don't need a Western programme. We need local programmes resourced globally. There is a very small market for International universities (and these need to be phased out). We must open up local validations. This should be our new policy." He concluded by reminding the Board that he had raised the money and couldn't go back to the donors with failure. It was better to cut the project now. The discussion had become quite heated and members of the Board were getting fidgety. Wisely the chair suggested that the matter be referred to a sub-committee to meet the following afternoon.

As we walked out of the meeting room the vice-chair of the Board said to me, "that was a good example of 'management by grenade'". It was intended, I think, to comfort me although I felt as if my legs had been blown off. The Dean tried to reassure me by reminding me that the Director had announced his retirement and was walking away from something that had been his baby for 25 years. I saw it as the latest wave of what we might call the post-post-colonial struggle in higher education. Many countries have grown in economic confidence in recent years and understandably want to do it themselves. Skills, money and other resources now exist in country. A Centre of higher learning in the UK clearly does need to keep its role and programme under review. But conflicting influences on the meeting were blurring the vision and were in danger of paralysing the process.

Systems emerge from the collective will of their members and when these conflict, the system can respond in unpredictable ways. In this particular case the

dimensions and direction of these forces - epistemological disputes, post-colonial tensions, economics and questions of personal identity - could not have been mapped in advance. We were all caught in a system, to borrow de Certeau's image, too vast to be our own, too tightly woven for us to escape from it (de Certeau 1984). No-one in the system had created it and no-one was able to see the whole. No-one was in control. As different participants tried to take control, their action resembled what de Certeau calls a "tactic" rather than a "strategy" - action characterised "by the *absence of power* just as a strategy is organized by the postulation of power" (de Certeau 1984, 37). Tactics "must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power" (ibid). I will return to this paradox in a moment when I will explore two complementary ways of thinking about systems, but first I am reminded of a story from ancient Israel.

## Intermission: The Wisdom of an Ass

The arrival of the tribes of Israel back in Canaan was clearly a threat to the indigenous population. "They cannot settle in my backyard," they thought. So the king of Moab summoned Balaam to curse these people. Being a religious man Balaam first sought guidance from God and was told that they were not to be cursed but blessed. But the invitation was repeated and, on the second occasion, seeing that Balaam was inclined to accept the invitation since it was backed by a tidy fee, God told him he could go, provided he only did what he was told. Yet "God was angry that Balaam had gone." It was an eventful journey. Suddenly his donkey walked off the road and into an open field. Irritated, Balaam took a stick and beat his donkey back on to the road. A little while later they passed down a narrow path between two vineyards with a stone wall on each side. Without warning the donkey veered to one side pushing so close to one of the walls that Balaam's foot was scraped against the wall. Angry with his behaviour Balaam beat his animal to move him on. A third time the donkey acted strangely, this time stopping and lying down in the middle of the path. The story is worth continuing in the words from the book of Numbers (chapter 22):

"Balaam lost his temper, then picked up a stick and hit the donkey.

"When that happened, the Lord told the donkey to speak, and it asked Balaam, "What have I done to you that made you beat me three times?"

"You made me look stupid!" Balaam answered. "If I had a sword, I'd kill you here and now!"

"But you are my owner," replied the donkey, "and you have ridden me many times. Have I ever done anything like this before?"

"No." Balaam admitted.

Just then the Lord let Balaam see the angel standing in the road, holding a sword, and Balaam bowed down. The angel said, "You have no right to treat your donkey like that! I was the one who blocked your way, because I don't think you should go to Moab. If your donkey had not seen me and stopped those three times, I would have killed you and let the donkey live."

The donkey served Balaam in much the same way as Sanjara, the charioteer, served the blind king, Dhritarashtra in the Hindu epic, the Bhagavad Gita. Roadblocks have significance. They are not just obstacles to be overcome or circumvented. They may be caused by an angel, if only I had eyes to see the whole.

## Thinking and Acting in Systems

Early in their work on complexity in organisations, Ralph Stacey and his colleagues in the Complexity and Management Centre at the University of Hertfordshire recognised the paradoxical nature of life in organisations. "Managers are supposed to be in charge," they wrote, "and yet they find it difficult to stay in control"

(Stacey et al 2000, 5). The problem, they concluded, lay with the way the dominant discourse thought of the organisation as a system, "at a higher level than the individuals, having properties of its own and acting back on the individuals as a cause of their actions" (Stacey 2007, 235). This way of conceptualising the organisation sets the individual and the system in opposition. As people act they build up mental models of the world in which they are acting that shape the way they respond to this world (Stacey et al 2000). This "organisation in the mind" (Briskin 1998) is not the world "out there" but a picture that holds our interpretation of the experience. Mental models can be questioned, as Argyris and Schon (1996) have shown, but people find this difficult and to avoid having to do so, issues become undiscussable (ibid). These patterns of anxiety avoidance become embedded in rituals and practices that may be at odds with the primary task of the organisation (Shaw & Stacey 2006). Managers resort to appeals for good relationships, differences are suppressed (for the common good), and organisational harmony is enforced through the exercise of supposedly benevolent power.

Over the past decade Stacey et al have explored an alternative perspective on organisations that sees the whole not as designed or chosen in advance but emerging through the interaction of individuals with each other - what they have called, "complex responsive processes of relating" (Stacey 2007, 239). This has importance for our ways of thinking about strategic planning, the nature of leadership, and systems - indeed Stacey claims that "this way of thinking has no need for concepts such as "system" (ibid). The process is self-organising. No one in the process can choose what will happen to all of them. "What happens ... will emerge in the interplay of their intentions and no one can be in control of this interplay" (ibid). Understanding organisational behaviour, then, requires attention to the "conversational forms of power relating based on ideology and reflected in intentions and choices" (ibid).

The dominant discourse distributes power according to position since it sees it as a finite resource dedicated to fulfilling an organisation's purpose. The new paradigm

on the other hand sees power, not as an attribute or possession of an individual, but as a characteristic of all human relating. Power arises between people as they relate (Shaw 2002). Power enables or constrains the relationship, continually rearranging it as individual intentions and actions interact. In complex systems this is not just happening between individuals but throughout the system. This helps me reflect on the Board meeting described above. Rather than accepting the incident as a top-down exercise of power by the Director I can receive it as a complex process involving hidden movements in loyalty as the discussion progressed.

This perspective also suggests a way of participating in organisations for the mutual good. Positive relational practice involves give and take, letting go and accepting one another as we are, not as we might ideally become. This requires a way of listening to each others stories in ways that don't hijack them. It is the kind of conversation in which someone says what you are thinking and you don't feel it was stolen, but respected. Elias describes this as "valuing," as others "offer, withhold and change their responses to our responses, generating for each of us feelings of being more or less powerful, influential or powerless" (in Shaw 2002, 73). This also suggests a way of thinking about the anxiety that, in the traditional understanding of organisations leads to avoidance. As complex relational processes organisations are the location of individual and social formation. As different voices arise it is inevitable that anxiety is aroused. As Shaw points out, this is a necessary consequence when the past is continually reconstructed and the future is perpetually under construction through the continuous interaction of the participants (Shaw & Stacey 2006, 122). Viewed in this way, discussions such as the one that occurred in the Board meeting, are ways of organising the future, not simply opportunities for those in authority to impose their will. This has implications for the way such meetings are chaired and for my own action as a guest.

By drawing attention to organisations as contexts of complex relational practice Stacey and his colleagues have helped demystify systems, suggesting quite

different tactics for participating in them. But by reducing the system to the dynamic interplay of the participants they fail to name what emerges. Indeed they suggest that there is no longer any need to talk of systems. "Patterns of human interaction produce further patterns of interaction, not some *thing* outside of the interaction" (Stacey and Griffin 2008, 1). However, it seems to me, what emerges through human interaction does have substance and acts upon its participants in unexpected and sometimes unpleasant ways. By focussing exclusively on the process Stacey may have discounted the significance of the policies and bureaucratic procedures that result from it. In this sense the paradox is not resolved. Systems emerge from these complex responsive processes that seem to have a mind of their own. Managers lose control, and simply replacing the manager doesn't change the system. So while I have found the views described above of enormous help in navigating my organisational environment, I would like to introduce another, hopefully complementary, perspective.

The traditional view of organisations assigns responsibility for their processes to the conscious choice of their participants, and particularly to their leaders. The basic assumption is control. A quantum view of organisations, on the other hand, sees the organisation as an interacting field in which order is not fixed or rigid but "a dynamic energy swirling around us" (Wheatley 1994, 119), its bloodstream flowing with information. If "consciousness is a property that emerges when a certain level of organisation is reached" Wheatley suggests, then "the greater the ability to process information, the greater the level of consciousness. With this definition, organizations qualify as conscious entities" (Wheatley 1994, 107).

While fields change as a result of individual activity, once formed they can sustain themselves and propagate, even when those who spoke them into existence have moved off the scene. Owen (2000) is bold to name the field "Spirit" although wisely he does not define it. Spirit shows up when the system is in flow and when Spirit is depleted we see signs of what he calls Soul Pollution, that exhibits itself in stress, exhaustion, apathy or a feeling of being overwhelmed by the great amorphous *They* (Owen 2000). The system continues to run by processes its

creators may have initiated but, by virtue of scale, can no longer control. These are not always benign, they can become pathological.

The traditional response will involve an often frantic attempt to maintain order, trying at all costs to prevent the situation descending into chaos. "Don't frighten the horses," I was told by the Dean when we faced uncertainty with the format of research proposals to be submitted for university registration. As a result we conformed to the system, although this involved additional work for the students who had already prepared a research narrative that I felt more adequately and thoroughly presented their intentions. As systems increase in scale there are practical difficulties in convening appropriate conversations to address these concerns. As our relationship with the new university developed, despite the remarkable political skill of our champion, the Pro Vice Chancellor, I became aware of processes to which we had no access, that were shaping the destiny of the project. Scale up the systems and they can be experienced as oppressive, sustained by myths that cannot be questioned. I experienced this in my early career as a broadcast manager in the final years of apartheid in South Africa. The emotional impact of the incident remains with me today:

There was something incongruous about the lavish furnishings in the room and its location above a shopping mall in a middle class Pretoria suburb. Outside, I had parked my car alongside bakkies and BMWs in front of the crowded shops. People of European origin were busy about their business - there was a purpose to their step. Africans squatted amongst the discarded drink cans and dust on the edge of the pavement or hung around near the doors hoping for an odd job or a hand out.

Upstairs I noticed a slight smell of furniture oil in the huge wood panelled office. In the area near the door was a circle of leather bound sofas and a coffee table, displaying several books depicting the scenery and wildlife of South Africa. Bookshelves filled the wall to my left. Towards the window, and facing me behind a massive oak desk was the Director of the Afrikaans

production company. He stood to greet me and pointed to a chair on the other side of the desk. The lounge chairs were for less formal meetings.

I had been in Africa for less than a year. I had inherited a production contract with this organisation that allocated them exclusive responsibility for programme production in Afrikaans and half a dozen local African languages. As Programme Director for an international radio station in Swaziland I had become concerned about the lack of investment in African programming and had decided that unless there was a clear commitment to staff training and more imaginative output we should bring several language projects in-house.

This was not our first meeting. On previous visits I was always made welcome and invited to meals in good restaurants. My wife and I had even been invited to spend a weekend on his farm. At the same time I had also made good friends in the African population. I remember one respected elder amongst the Tswanas who told me that the Africans could usually make up their minds about an ex-patriot within the first couple of weeks of their arrival on the continent. They quickly decided who they could trust.

A few minutes into our agenda and I began to realise that my ideas were not welcome. While the organisation was happy to host production in the African languages the majority of the sponsorship came from Afrikaans sources and they had to serve their own people first. I began to suggest that we take over direct responsibility for production in the African languages, but this was not acceptable - how could an international company know how to manage the Africans or have any idea of what was appropriate for them to listen to?

Suddenly, the Director jumped from his desk and walked swiftly across the 25 or more feet of blue carpeted floor to the door. "This is not the way we do things here," he told me, opening the door for me to leave. "I suggest you go back to England - and I will personally buy you the one way ticket home."



I didn't accept the offer and continued for another 12 months in the job. By then we had started to restructure the programming, giving the African languages more control over their budget and development. I was invited back a couple of years later for a production conference that was led by Africans and soon after an African was appointed as director. Quality broadcasting was to become, for me, a matter of social and political justice. As I recall I was disappointed and frustrated, more than angry, as I left the office that day, although my wife remembers the incident and reminds me that I was completely silent during the 5 hour drive back to our home in Swaziland. Having been raised in the footprint of the BBC I took for granted that broadcasting can be organised in the public interest although it was not until I returned to Europe that I realised that public broadcasting operated by a professional elite was unable to adequately give voice to minorities. The system could not cope with the challenge.

Liberation theologians in South America, faced with oppressive economic and political systems, were the first to propose a way of thinking about these systems in spiritual terms. In a radical re-telling of the Biblical notion of the "principalities and powers" they saw them, not as disembodied spirits floating above the earth, but as institutions, structures, and systems. This was radical because it suggests that the systems we create and inhabit have an inner spiritual power. And it helps explain how, when their creators lose control, they can drift from purpose, become dysfunctional and even pathological. What may be happening is nothing more than an expression of the collective will that has lost its way - the system no longer fulfilling its human or environmental vocation. They are not "possessed" by anything other than their own way of doing things. But without the compassionate oversight of their creators they can become dysfunctional. No institution exists as an end in itself, but rather to serve the common good. However, in an inspired insight, liberation theology argues that the powers that control the systems are fallen, not evil, and can therefore be called back to serve more human ends. Their

power can be redirected as people withdraw their consent. Their Spirit can be renewed<sup>30</sup>.

It is worth remembering, however, that this involves a struggle. Jesus saw that the active life would create enemies. Hence his emphasis on loving our enemies, what McIntosh (2008) calls our “worthy adversaries,” if for no other reason that they, with us, are involved in the co-creation of our world. Our action then is not just social and political, but like a medieval mystery play,

“the name of the game of what gets played out before people during a campaign is nothing less than the revelation of God. Our activism in issues of ordinary life therefore becomes a form of mission: the articulation of spiritual vision. In other words, spiritual activism both sustains those of us who engage in it and teaches those around us some of the meanings of spirituality” (McIntosh 2008, 106-7).

Which brings me back to my own experience.

## **August 12th 2008**

The early part of 2008 was hectic. In February, around the time of her 94th birthday, my mother was diagnosed with cancer. Until then she had been remarkably fit and mentally alert. While laying the groundwork for the new programme and preparing an intensive Induction School for the first cohort of participants I was commuting across the country to be with her during therapy, and to help close down her small bungalow and move into care. A pattern of over-work and under-inquiry had become the norm. I had to catch a moment for quiet reflection when I could. I recall sitting in the hospital waiting room as my mother

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<sup>30</sup> For further discussion on spiritual power in human systems see Briskin 1998 and Wink 1998.

was receiving further radiation, writing Haiku. From where I was sitting I could see the warning lights outside the blue theatre switching between "no entry" and "radiation on." I counted the length of each burst of radiation - thirty seconds - before the lights went out, I presumed to permit some adjustments before another burst of radiation.

blue room, mild sunburn  
prayers ascending, fears receding  
cancer retreating

A few minutes later it was all over, my mother emerging with a smile on her face. She had lost a lot of weight and her main complaint was of the hard surface on which she had to lie.

By the end of April I was at saturation point. This is what I wrote in my journal on April 21st:

I'm really, really tired of things "to do"  
rotas to produce  
phone calls to return  
bills to pay  
budgets to produce  
memos to write  
notes to make of last week's meeting  
a student's writing to read  
emails, endless emails, to answer...

even being creative needs to fit onto my "to do" list

so I have learned to multi-task  
to do more than one thing at the same time  
listen to a lecture

and answer my emails on my laptop  
sit in a committee meeting  
preparing the notes for my next seminar

do others manage "to do" better than me?

when I have something "to do"  
then there are other things I can't do  
and I'm not available "to be"  
to be present and aware in the moment

I'm tired of "to do lists"  
they get longer before they get shorter  
sometimes things drop off the list before they are done  
the deadline passes  
but the world still turns

Will I ever wake up one morning  
without something "to do"  
buzzing around in my head?  
with a blank sheet in front of me  
inviting me  
to create rather than respond  
to participate joyfully in my surroundings  
to celebrate life?

Since November, when we had launched the new programme, I had been swept off my feet by the interest it had generated. By April, eight students had enrolled in the PhD programme and I went back to the university to upgrade our recruitment estimate for the first year from six to twenty. We added a further Induction School to the schedule and began to explore different ways of growing our resource to meet the demand.

I approached the second Induction School in June with excitement and fear. I was excited by the opportunity to explore action research over two weeks with the new candidates but nervous about the process. I recall my hesitation in producing a timetable and the realisation, almost as soon as we started, that we would abandon it. The participants brought a rich variety of professional experience into the process - the director of a Geneva based organisation involved in conflict resolution, a community worker from Washington DC, the director of a television production company in Ghana, for example - and the process needed to facilitate their voices. My journal notes, written during the school, record my own reflections on the choices of facilitation style, moving between hierarchical and cooperative modes (Heron 1999) as the process developed.

Most striking in these reflections are my thoughts on a discussion early in the school about action research triggered by the presentation of an action researcher from an educational background. Perhaps it was the rapid fire presentation of his powerpoint slides (he apologised at the beginning for condensing a 3 day workshop into 1 session) which left us breathless, and it was more than 20 minutes before anyone interrupted to ask a question; "So is action research another term for Evaluative Research?", they asked. The individual then described a project they had lead on assessing another educational institution's performance, drawing from interviews and surveys across the institution. The quick answer was, "it is AR if there is an implementation phase, if the process leads to action." The individual wasn't satisfied with the response and another joined in, giving an example from their professional experience about young people and drugs. Supported by both public and private funds they needed to give an account of their impact. "But I am trying to understand whether what I already do is AR", the first individual repeated. "This is the wrong question," a member of faculty interjected, "a PhD involves deeper levels of inquiry." I noticed one participant left the room at this point and learned later that he had gone to the kitchen to make a cup of coffee, commenting to someone in passing, "there is a battle going on in there at the moment."

As I debriefed with the Dean, after the session, I suggested that the participants had found the presentational style stifling. Their stories were bursting to come out but there had been little opportunity. We agreed to re-structure the following day, allowing time for conversations with the participants around their research interests.

A few days after the induction school ended I received a phone call from the university, explaining that they needed to cancel the next meeting of the Liaison Committee, the following Monday. Two days later we received a letter from the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, whom we had never met, expressing concerns about the future of the partnership and requesting an urgent meeting. Because of holidays we were unable to meet until the middle of August. The atmosphere in the meeting was brisk and businesslike. The Deputy VC explains, briefly, that as a result of a strategic review of the university undertaken by the new Vice Chancellor, they would no longer be able to resource our partnership. The decision had been taken. We needed to decide how to close the partnership as smoothly as possible. During the meeting a mobile phone rang. At first I paid no attention but then realised it was mine and scrambled to switch it off. Whoever it was would have to wait.

There was discussion about the number of students already enrolled in the programme. The Deputy VC was only aware of the four who had already submitted their registration documents but, as I tried to explain, we had a pipeline of 16 others who had enrolled with the Centre and were now preparing their registration. As a joint project these needed to be considered as well. We subsequently learned that the strategic review had far wider consequences across the university. It had "decimated" the research capacity of the School of Community and Health Sciences, for example, and other partnerships were terminated. I walked away from the experience aware of the importance of monitoring the alignment of our strategic goals as well as academic interests. In the commercialisation of higher education we brought little economic benefit to the university.

As we left the building at the end of the meeting I reached in my pocket to retrieve my phone and return the call. It was from my sister telling me that our mother had died at 11:00 o'clock, while I had been in the meeting. Jung defines synchronicity as "a meaningful coincidence of two or more events, where something other than the probability of chance is involved" (in Jaworski 1996, ix). A project that had increasingly become the fulfilment of my most deeply held values and a mother who had raised me and prayed for me throughout my life both died on the morning of August 12th 2008.

Death is the ultimate letting go, when the body has no more strength to keep going. My mother's final struggles were both physical and spiritual. As the disease took control in the last days of her life she entered a cycle of fear as she lost confidence in her own natural strength. I visited her two days before she died and all I could do was hold her hand quietly. My sister was with her when she died. We had spoken the evening before and we both felt that she was waiting for us to give her permission to go. My sister told me that later in the evening she became quieter and then, out loud, she made a confession of her faith and prayed for the family by name. This was the last thing she did. She said no more. She became unconscious while the disease did its final work. At first, in the stunned presence of death, time stood still. The past, the memories, would return later. The future would take even longer to emerge. But at first there was an emptiness.

As I think back on my professional life at the time I now realise that the hectic pace and conflicting demands on my time had squeezed out time for reflection. It was difficult to maintain an attitude of inquiry when the "to do" list was so long. There is a kind of doing that flows from a settled sense of being. But I was not settled - the project had momentum and I was pulled along by its demands. I had been involved in creating a project involving people, partnerships and resources - a complex system - with good purposes and strong values. But in my frantic attempt to stay in control I lost control. Something worthwhile and enabling had taken on a mind of its own. I was carried along by its energy, not guiding its development. Whether this contributed to its demise I cannot tell. Could I have prevented the

outcome? Probably not. Was I blind to some of the forces undermining its success? Undoubtedly. All the hard work had come to nothing, or so it seemed at the time.

Three days after the meeting with the university I received an email from the Dean:

"This is a moment at which I think I ought to say a simple 'thank you' for all the work commitment, effort and inspiration you have given to the 'project', and to admire your intensification of determination to make the 'project' happen." He then went on to say, "In the dark times it is difficult to see, but they are the times when we most need to trust. Being in the dark is not a bad place for intensification of 'reflection'! Did Schon write at all about the stormy seas as well as the swampy lowlands?"

I felt slightly patronised. For a while I ignored the message but then decided to respond:

"Perhaps I have a different perspective on what has been happening in the past few days. Schon may not have written about stormy seas but Brendan certainly experienced them! However, at this point, I don't feel buffeted by winds and waves - I feel becalmed. It may be time for an oar, not a sail! I don't see this as a dark time. It is, of course, disappointing that our expectations for the university relationship have been thwarted. But the vision for a radical innovation in research-based practice has not. And the university provided an environment in which we were able to incubate the vision. We are in a very different place today than we were two years ago. So I may be disappointed, but not discouraged. The university has told us that they do not want to continue this journey with us ... But the horizon of this vision is not bound by the university."

The Centre leadership didn't share my hopeful outlook. I should have heeded the advice of Brendan when the wind left them, and their food and water was in short



supply. It was not a time for the oars. It was time to give myself (ourselves) up to the will of the sea. To listen to the wind and let it tell me where to go.

Management took direct control of announcing the decision. I was gagged. I found myself excluded from discussions. Faced with potential chaos the management resorted to structure and I was not involved in numerous management meetings that discussed the issue. But I kept paddling. For example, I tried to move the discussion forward by offering a short list of prospective university partners. Silence. I wrote up a short case for approaching the top runner and was told I was not to approach them. At the beginning of September I decided to offer evidence of the importance of the programme in recruitment. I estimated that the new programme had been responsible for 50% of enrollment in the past year (its first year). No response.

This was repeated over the next few weeks. As my isolation deepened my only recourse was to my journal. In early September I wrote, "I fluctuate between irritation, frustration and despair. I maintain a positive outlook and presence but inwardly begin to doubt the ability of the institution to re-establish the project." A few days later I was informed that the programme would be closed and my contract would not be renewed beyond the end of the year. My frustration turned to anger. I was unwilling to let go of the vision and wrongly assumed that it should be developed within the structures of the Centre. I was hurt by the way its management had closed rank, excluding me and the project from its future. It took a long time to recover from the pain and confusion of this death. As the weeks dragged into months every attempt to negotiate a fresh start for the project was rejected. The space in which I worked had collapsed, the programme was dead and I was surplus to requirements. I had been taken to the edge of the river that flows through the Land of Promise but was not allowed to cross.

But there was more for me to learn about myself. I had been here before. Three years earlier I had received a gift that transformed the grief of ending into hope. For several years I had been a consultant to a media organisation in the Middle East. Perhaps, with hindsight, I had bitten off more than I could chew. Perhaps the

client was unwilling to change. But it all came to a head in the conference room of a seaside hotel in Cyprus. By the end of the day I had done something I had never done before, or since - I walked out of the meeting and resigned a consultancy contract nine months before it was due to end. I was frustrated and hurt.

It was quite late in the afternoon of the following day when I finally left my room to take a walk along the beach, hardly aware of my surroundings. This is what I wrote in my journal:

24 hours after my decision to withdraw from the contract I walked out of the hotel and along the beach, deep in thought, reflecting on the events of the past few days. I could hear the waves lapping the shore and felt the sun on my balding head but my attention was inward.

After walking for perhaps fifteen or twenty minutes I quite suddenly noticed that the sand beneath my feet had given way to pebbles and as I looked down I found myself surrounded by small white stones. I reached down and picked one up, fingering it in the palm of my hand. In that moment I remembered reading Charles Handy's (1997) comment on the white stone, promised "to the one who prevails" in the Book of Revelation. This gift, to be received at the end of life, has written on it, "a new name, known only to him who received it" (Revelation 2:17).

There was no name on the stone I held in my hand. I noticed how smooth it had become from the endless battering with others in the waves. But it was not perfect. I rubbed my thumb over a small chip - a "wound" from a recent (in geological terms) encounter with another stone. My imagination was fired and I thought of my life, knocked about and yet smoothed by interaction with others. Perhaps, like marble in the hands of Michelangelo, my name - my true identity - lies hidden inside, to be revealed gradually by the bangs and bruises of life. I gripped the stone firmly in my hand, aware

that my identity, my true name, lies in what I am becoming, only to be known at the end and received as a gift.

I was startled by the idea and suddenly found the experience of the past few days re-framed in a very different way. When the Spirit gives me my stone I will then know who I am, and not before. My life is a search for myself. I am who I am becoming - an enormous incentive to "living life as inquiry." I am on a journey towards wholeness where identity and daily living meet.



## I Hear the White Bird Speak for the First Time

*... we are not quite what we imagine ourselves to be, nor are we quite as in control of our beliefs as we think, not quite so essential as we imagine. Our loves and identities move in and through us like viral infections. And yet hope stands before us in places we never suspected: the moment more complex than an eternity, and faith different altogether than anything we now know.*

(Inchausti 2005)

*I have not made my book more than my book has made me*

Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592)

I set out in this thesis to explore my practice as a programme leader and learning facilitator using a palette of approaches to the inquiry. I have described experiences of reflective practice and highlighted my attempts at deeper levels of awareness. I have reflected on my growing sense of connectedness to others and the knowing that comes with reverence. I have faced the ubiquitous nature of human systems and confronted their attempts to colonise my soul (McIntosh 2004) and shut down the space for creative action. And I have chosen to present this account in narrative form, not only because of the polysemic nature of story but also because by thinking *with* stories I am able to add further levels of reflection as the plot has developed.

My purpose in this inquiry has been, as the title suggests, to witness to moments of integrity and presence in fractals of my professional experience. These

characteristics of practice are not a fixed feature of who I am but emerge as I live my life and tell my story. I am what I am becoming. Throughout the inquiry I have tried to reach into my experience to find myself. The inquiry has been a cognitive, emotional and spiritual process - how I think, feel and connect with what is bigger than/different from me. Professional practice, therefore, can no longer be separated from questions of embodiment and spirituality, that is, attempts to understand what brings together the multiple selves of my daily experience and provides nourishment for my way of being in the world.

For most of this journey my experiences and reflection on those experiences was episodic and I found it difficult to craft a coherent narrative. One story, however, kept returning throughout this research - the legend of Brendan's Voyage. This story seemed able to hold my experience in a way that honoured its complexity and yet gave it coherence. It fulfilled the criteria recognised by Nietzsche (1974), who said, "Above all, one should not wish to divest existence of its rich ambiguity" (quoted in Flyvbjerg 2006, 237). It was as if I found myself in the story as I found the story in myself, and was inspired to live in the story as I pondered how the story might live in me. As I began to craft the thesis it was tempting to use Brendan's story to provide a structure for the thesis but this failed. Instead, it has lived alongside, or underneath, my own story, adding perspective and depth to my inquiries.

I first told the Brendan story to my supervision group in April 2008. I have already described how I came to place myself in the story. I became one of Brendan's followers. When I had finished telling the story Geoff, our supervisor, invited us to take a few moments to let the story wash over us, noticing the points when we had felt connected. Geoff mentioned the first moment when we saw the white birds and Margaret was drawn to the rather playful occasion when we were set free from the confines of the boat to run back and forth on Jasconius's back and light a fire to prepare some food.

Nick was captured by the image of us leaning out of the boat trying to catch water from the cliff's edge. Bob, too, was caught by this incident and commented on Brendan's instruction to us to "just hang on for three more days." "By then you were desperately thirsty and I wanted to ask, why did you follow Brendan?" There is a precious moment captured on the recording of the session when, in response to Bob's question I quipped back, "because I couldn't get out of the boat." This produced a spontaneous burst of laughter as the simplicity and depth of this thought caught us all and we were taken to a place of knowing we had not expected. I was touched by the way the story was able to tell a truth that would probably have been missed by a more rational mind. There were many times on this journey when, despite my thirst and frustration, getting out of the boat was not an option, although eventually, like Jonah, I would be thrown out of it.

Our interaction with the story was taken further by a simple activity Geoff then invited the group to try. I was invited to listen as one by one the others in the group adopted an image or incident in the story that had caught them. We were then encouraged to question the image, as the individual gave expression to whatever came up in response. Geoff, taking the place of the white birds was asked, "What do you think when you see a boat approaching the island?" to which he replied, "here is a chance for me to sing and be heard." "Do your visitors always ask the same question?" "No," was the reply, "some don't say very much at all. Some look frightened, some laugh. I like the ones that laugh." Nick, as the crystal pure water flowing down the cliffs into the sea was asked, "How long have you flowed off the cliff" to which he replied, "Since the beginning of time." "And what happens to those who drink your water?" "They become me." Margaret surprised us as the fire on Jasconius's back by suggesting that when the great fish dived beneath the waves the fire kept burning, sustained by oxygen from Jasconius's body.

In different ways we were experiencing the creativity of uncensored imagination, letting the story take us wherever it might go. By staying in the imaginative space the story was able to breathe, offering glimpses of the back stories we bring to our

listening, and discovering our shared archetypal consciousness. At this point in the activity Bob chose to be the mist.

"What are you hiding people from?" we asked.

"Themselves," Bob replied.

"What is the moment of receiving someone like?"

"Slightly shocking. It feels like an intrusion until I've wrapped myself completely around them and I know it is time for me to do my work"

"How long does it take to do that work?"

"It is different, sometimes only days, sometimes months."

"Do you take different forms?"

"I am always a mist but my form as a mist can change - colder or warmer, wetter or dryer, tempestuous or calm."

"What do you feel when they are in there with you?"

"Protective, but I'm also there to challenge them, to test them, to make them a little scared."

"What gives you pleasure?"

"To reveal the island. Sometimes I tease them a bit because I enjoy that moment so much - perhaps that's my naughtiness."

"What do people have to do to break free of the mist?"

"I wait until they are calm and I feel they are ready for me to reveal what I will reveal."

"This story happened a long time ago - where are you now?"

"I'm still there."

"Do people still come to you?"

"Yes."

The mist is a place of transition, a threshold, in which time stands still while everything changes. The mist, of course, says nothing about the way it works other than a broad hint that it tests those who enter, changing form from colder to warmer, wetter or dryer. You have to enter the mist to know how it works. It is a place of ambiguity, confusion and risk.



As I write this concluding chapter of the thesis I realise that my telling of the Brendan story has been too tame, too remote. I was recording the experience as an observer, not as a participant. Although I had decided to “write myself” into the story, and even told it on several occasions in the first person, I had not lived it. I was still searching for the words, drawing in phrases I had drafted and rehearsed in advance. I am fairly self-confident in speaking in front of people and so it may not have been evident to my listeners but I knew - I had not really been on the journey myself.

Yet I had. I had simply rationalised the whole process, suppressing my feelings and missing the opportunity to give full expression to the experiences. It has come to me very slowly but I now see how foolish I have been. In some way I have clung to ideas, like pieces of driftwood, that seem to fit the way I experience the world. But the death of the project finally dragged me from abstract ideas and argument to face the reality of daily life. For a long time I thought I had been to the Land of Promise and reached the river’s edge where I was prevented from crossing. At one level perhaps I had. But I now realise the mistake of thinking that the Land of Promise exists on the same plane as all the other islands, just a little further on in the journey, eventually to appear on the horizon.

As we interact with narrative it becomes possible to play with its structure. All places in the story co-exist and so, as I faced death and its consequences, I finally found myself in the boat, in the mist. It was a bit scary but there was no turning back. We had spent a long time together on the boat. I knew every knot in the timber and crease in the leather. Now, unable to see beyond its rough form, drifting in the silence, my journey began to take on new meaning. There is an ancient mariner’s saying that, “beyond the edge of the map there be monsters” and I could feel their eerie presence as the mist wrapped itself around me.

What follows, as I bring the thesis to a close, is a series of “meditations from the mist”, or meta-reflections on the journey. They are thoughts drawn largely from my journal writing in the months following the death of the project, as I began to

step back and allow the wider ecology to redirect my passion and energy. In different ways they offer different perspectives on what I have learned on this journey. I have developed approaches to inquiry that have influenced my management and teaching practice and these are described in earlier chapters of the thesis. This chapter takes me closer to the heart of my inquiry - the transformation of myself as an actor in the world that I would now argue is the promise inherent in taking an attitude of inquiry to my ways of being in the world. I have come to see that all experience, in Gadamer's (1989) sense of experience, contains an invitation to lift up my eyes and view my reality from a different perspective. Each one involves a small death to ways of thinking or acting in which I was heavily invested. The death of the project was not an unfortunate interruption to my victory narrative, but an invitation for me to locate of myself in the larger drama hinted at by George Steiner (1989), at the end of *Real Presences* when he suggests that "ours is the long day's journey of the Saturday" (ibid, 232) between the injustice and suffering of Good Friday and the promised liberation of Sunday.

## I Crossing the Threshold

For months after the death of the Programme in Professional Practice I was unable to function effectively. I initially saw my research as an insider but now I was no longer inside. As I described in the last chapter the context had collapsed and the story, at least the story I had been living, had come to an abrupt and painful end. The system no longer valued the story and had rejected it. Or, almost. After informing me that the project had been closed and my contract would not be renewed I was offered a six month part time contract (two days a week) to complete the development work on a practitioner-based Masters degree. It was as if the system was hesitating in its decision, wanting to keep its options open. This proved frustrating, extending the pain of closure since it was clear that the system had lost the plot and would not be able to muster the resources for the vision to continue.

I have always been a goal-oriented person. I like to finish a job and move on. But this time I had lost control. I was no longer able to continue the project and I was angry that the system had rejected the vision and ejected me. Although on the surface I was restrained, anger brewed beneath the surface and on one occasion broke through the facade. In a meeting with the new Dean to discuss the management of the students who had already enrolled in the PhD in Professional Practice I became frustrated. I insisted that these students should not be required to conform to the traditional PhD procedures. They had enrolled under different terms and conditions and would be unable to fulfil the residency requirements. I also suggested that it would be very difficult to find adequate resources for individual supervision. A head of steam built up quickly and I lost control. The words, "you don't understand Action Research!" burst from my lips. I felt the muscles around my waist tighten and my voice went up a third of an octave as I said it. The outburst did little to improve the conditions for the students or my own situation. There was no point in giving him "a piece of my mind", but I had done it.

Anger arises, according to the ancient fathers of the church, as a result of thwarted goals, goals to which the ego attaches itself, leaving us convinced that the system is wrong. But, as Evagrius (d. 399), Cassian (d. 434) and others remind us so clearly, this arises from the way we think about our experiences, not from the situation itself. This has consequences. Anger leaves us blind. Our judgement is impaired and we are unable to rightly interpret the evidence of our senses. There are, according to this tradition, eight territories of human experience that give rise to false thoughts and debilitating emotions like anger and sadness, and prevent us from being fully alive. This ancient wisdom connects the management of these thoughts and the emergence of virtue. The virtues will "spring up" naturally when we learn to control our thoughts. Like weeds in a garden the thoughts that feed our ego must be uprooted and discarded. Unfortunately this teaching became, two centuries later, in the hands of Pope Gregory the Great, the seven deadly sins, bringing into the western tradition a negative orientation to the spiritual disciplines that the early church fathers would not have recognised.

Following the earlier tradition, however, as we let go of the thoughts that pre-occupy and blind us, the ground is cleared for the virtues to emerge. Perhaps here are the ancient roots to the current recognition of the influence of our mental models. As Bateson (2000) acknowledges, “we arrive at every encounter ... betrayed by our assumptions” (Bateson 2000, 161). It is not surprising that former generations attributed these false thoughts to “demons”, what today we would recognise as unhealthy projections of others or the self that control our actions. While it may be unconventional in a post-Enlightenment world to suggest that demons are the sponsors of the mental models that protect and defend the ego, in the heat of an experience there is a strong sense of being held captive, of “being possessed” by them. Letting go of their ways of framing my experience was not easy. How could I walk away from a dream that had been twenty years in the making? If, as I felt, the system had lost the plot I needed to be there to help it find it again. If I conceded to the inevitable what might happen to the vision? For weeks I continued to struggle with my thoughts, convinced that the project could be reconfigured and the vision carried forward. I was unwilling to accept the end. But slowly I began to realise that the decisions had been made and would not be reversed. As the backtalk of the situation continued to hammer home this conclusion, I faced a choice. To continue the struggle, with the system and in myself; or let go.

It is a particularly Christian insight to embrace death with hope. The Greek word *kenosis* conveys the notion of self-emptying, letting go of being to allow what might become to emerge. It is a crossing of the ultimate threshold from death to life. This is territory that raises more questions than answers and, in my own struggle, I realised that the demons don’t like questions. Their defence of the ego is based on fixed horizons and rigid certainty. The demons, it seemed to me, have no experience of death. They function in a world of continuity. They are uncomfortable in the mist, anxious to come out the way they came in.

I faced a choice. I could continue to exist, to be, in the place the system had put me. I was without work at the beginning of the worst economic downturn of my

generation and just a few years from retirement. Or I could refuse to be named as the system named me (Frank 1995). This would be more, a lot more, than a matter of picking myself up, dusting off my jacket, and moving on. Death strips everything away. For the experience to have meaning I came to see it as the end of "being" and the beginning of "becoming." No longer able to "be" what my personal history and professional experience had made me - a self-confident programme leader and learning facilitator with wide international experience - I was being set free to become what this promised but was not able to deliver while my ego stood in the way.

One way to think about the intellectual turmoil of what has been called "post-modernity" is to see it as a struggle to the death with an ontology of being, rooted in the Cartesian self. Since Descartes: "Everything, in so far as it is in itself, endeavours to persist in its own being" (Spinoza in Olthuis 1997, 237). In a fascinating discussion of power, self and the deconstructionist Derrida, Olthuis describes the inevitable consequences of Spinoza's claim. By linking power and essence, "power becomes the central concept of modern ontologies" (Olthuis 1997, 237). Being, in the Cartesian worldview, is seen as a system of control and domination. "One either dominates or is dominated ... To be a self is to have enemies" (ibid, 237).

But Descartes' epistemological and agentic self has proved to be false, falling at the same stake as reason itself. The deconstructionists have convincingly brought us to the edge of uncertainty, the "un/decidability" of living on the threshold. There is no going forward or backward. We are condemned, it seems, to live on a never ending Saturday. For Derrida "once Reason has been dethroned, there is no other possibility for providing direction and hope" (Olthuis 1997, 244). But there is a hint of hope. To cross the threshold would be, as Derrida himself recognises in his interaction with the 14th century mystic, Meister Eckhart, to see with the eye of love, "an eye that opens up a place beyond words, where words are no longer necessary" (ibid, 244). But, according to Olthuis, although Derrida has hinted at what this might be for him, he is unable to come home and tell his story.

The way beyond Derrida's dilemma, following Olthuis, is a response to what I sense is the call of love, a recognition that relationship goes all the way down to the roots of existence itself, constantly inviting response, offering fresh beginnings and new opportunities for becoming. Olthuis proposes that the alternative to Descartes self-grounding in "I think, therefore I am," is the possibility that "I am loved, therefore I am" (1997, 245). Rather than retreating into "the supposed certitude and splendid isolation of [the] ego" (ibid, 246) he offers an image of "the wild spaces of love." I will say a little more about this radical view of the self in the last section of this chapter.

At first unacknowledged and even brushed aside, but then with greater insistence, love was pushing against my assumptions, posing uncomfortable questions. Was I allowing the way the system was framing the situation to shape my response, and, as a result, not acting out of my own framing? Was I allowing the indecision and paralysis to undermine my vision? Was I trying to work around what I saw as institutional myopia? Why was I unable to see that the system had begun to pollute my soul (Owen 2000)? Later I would contemplate ways in which I might have re-storied the situation to take account of other stories being played out in the situation - institutional and personal. What necessities were others in the situation carrying? What emotions were they suppressing as they tried to make sense of what had happened? The arrival of a new Dean had coincided with the closure of the project and I had no time to develop our relationship. In several conversations I tried to find points of connection between our personal stories but they were treated superficially. What story might have built the kind of relationship needed for the project to continue? I began to realise that while I was saying, "all I want to do is help the project, the institution and you to succeed", I was actually putting myself into opposition.

Slowly I began to see that when the system rejected the project it became impossible for me to live the qualities of professional practice at the heart of my inquiry. I came to realise, referring to Torbert's (2004) learning loops, that there is a fourth loop that can take an inquiry deeper than questions of action, plans or

purpose. To be fully myself would involve a shift in consciousness beyond the boundaries of particular systems or ways of thinking (paradigms) to see my actions as part of a bigger story that refuses to be confined to context or time but responds to the embrace of love.

This inquiry began with a programmatic purpose, to take an action research approach to “improving my practice as a programme leader and learning facilitator.” For a while I tried to write the last chapter of my inquiry as closure to this story, without success. That story, bound by its objective of improving the teaching and management of a Master’s programme, had ended. But the thesis is no longer about a Master’s programme but about the qualities of professional life that were crucial to my own performance. My freefall writing in 2007 had given me a new way of framing the inquiry, writing “towards integrity and presence in practice” but I had not realised, until now, that this would open up a bigger story and lead me to pursue these qualities at a deeper level. It is no longer about discovering a particular way of doing professional education. It has become a different story, one that I am still living. How might I live by the principles of integrity and presence beyond the context in which I have worked, and where might this lead me? I was part of a bigger story where I could be *for* others in other places. Drifting in the mist, I began to let go of the context in which I had worked for many years to embrace a world without boundaries. A different consciousness was emerging that is not contained by physical or systemic limits. I had begun to cross the threshold from being to becoming.

## **II Finding My Voice**

Drifting for months in the mist I have had plenty of time to recall the early days of the journey. The cuts and bruises I picked up at the beginning have become calloused and weathered, each one carrying a memory of achievements or injuries on the way. I laugh now at my lack of experience. How did I expect to take this

journey without the full commitment of body and soul? But I remember - it began in my head.

I was slightly taken aback by the reaction of my first supervision group, just a month after starting the CARPP journey. I had carefully crafted a paper describing "my research interests" and felt fairly confident as we began the session. In the paper I acknowledged the "personal background, motivation, values and beliefs" at the heart of good practice, and made the statement that "the transformation of the profession begins in the first person, as practitioners develop an inquiring approach to their daily decisions." (CARPP writing February 2004). Several members of the group had printed the paper and gave it to me at the end of the session with their comments scribbled in the margins. "Do you include yourself as a media practitioner in this inquiry?" one had written. And another: "What are your values? What drives you here? What are your attachments?" (underlined in the original). "Good start David," one person wrote at the end of the paper, "would be interesting to explore your own personal inquiry more deeply." A month later, with a second piece of writing and a different group, the comments were similar, "how does this relate to you?" one asked, "I would like more of your thought bubbles," said another.

At first the challenge to find my own voice left me confused. In response I decided to include more personal anecdotes in my writing as if the presence of the personal pronoun would suffice. Gradually over the months I came to understand the subtle way in which a positivist outlook on life had framed my assumptions about what knowledge is and how it is acquired. I was a technician wanting to manipulate the components of learning in better ways. Action research appealed to me because it allowed me to investigate practice, although I saw this as something outside myself. I was looking at action research from within the empirical positivist worldview (Reason & Torbert 2001). Nine months into my inquiries I wrote, "I am still trying to find my own voice. Writing in a personal voice has been difficult, yet it has helped me see that I had been noticeably absent in my own work in the past. I have enjoyed and benefited from the examples and experience of CARPP faculty



and members of my supervision groups. I have even attempted to mimic some of the examples, but they were not me. First person inquiry is too personal to copy from someone else" (CARPP writing, September 2004).

I would like to think that each movement of my journey has evoked further dimensions of presence in my communication. My awakening to feeling as an essential source of knowledge was traumatic as the stories of that period record, but slowly my sense making deepened as I wrote about these experiences. But it remains easier to revert to cognitive description, offering what Wood calls "an epistemology from the neck up" (Wood 1998, 28). Sitting, with only my fingers active on the keyboard and my eyes focused on the computer screen, I can be tempted by Descartes conclusion that "... this 'me', that is to say, the soul by which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from my body" (Descartes in Wood 1998, 28). I needed to be shaken, emotionally and physically, to discover that "we are embodied beings whose intellectual purchase on the world is mediated by our physicality" (Wood 1998, 29).

A more recent example brings the struggle up to date. We were a group of 16, gathered over a weekend at Emerson College to work on the craft of storytelling. We were invited to wander around the room while shifting awareness of the centre of our being to different parts of our bodies. "Live in your belly," the facilitator invited us, "notice how you feel as you walk the room being present in your belly." At first I found myself thinking about this, not doing it, but the sight of others who were clearly centred and settled in their bodies helped me to let go. As the centre of my attention shifted I noticed that I began to walk differently. I felt solid and strong. "Notice the lack of emotions in this place," the facilitator suggested, "this should be an experience of "is-ness" .... "Now, shift the location of your presence in the room to your chest, the seat of your emotions." As I adjusted the focus of my bodily attention I saw the effect this instruction had on others, their own chests thrusting them into the room. It felt both welcoming and vulnerable. "Can you feel a sense of "we-ness" from this place? Now live in your head." It felt slightly odd to be invited to give attention to my normal way of being, in my head, as we

continued to wander around the room. My more normal posture might have been to sit down, to park my body to give my head full rein. We ended the activity by trying consciously to move the centre of our being forward and back to each of these places. Later I wrote in my journal, "I found it quite difficult to "be present" in the different parts of my body .... It was a challenge to realise how neglected my body has been as a source of consciousness or of expressive being."

The physicality of knowing has been a learning edge throughout this inquiry, pushing me towards a more embodied, relational way of being. This was what I recorded in my journal on one occasion:

It came on quite suddenly. The muscles in my abdomen contracted and I felt slightly nauseous. My breathing became more rapid and I felt a tightness around my neck. It's a state of being I would label "anxious" - but why was I feeling this way and how might the tension pent up in my body be released? I've become used to pushing on, of ignoring these kinds of feelings, although I suspect if I had been more observant they have often affected my speech or behaviour. This time I have paused to notice the feeling and allow it to work through me and inform my actions.

What I have noticed is how the quality and depth of my inquiry has been enriched as I have "come to my senses" (Berman in Reason 1994, 12), affirming the wisdom of the body and welcoming the presence of this "is-ness" and "we-ness" in my writing.

Early in writing the thesis I recognised a tendency to fall back on other people's ideas to make sense of my own experience. Most of my "secondary sources", to resort to conventional research language, have been books and articles relevant to my inquiries. As a practitioner I have a pragmatic view of ideas. I have not offered a traditional "literature review" with which to locate my inquiries but my reading has helped extend my inquiry, paying attention to the experience and knowledge of others, as I have moved in and out of the literature. In the process I have applied

an evaluative judgement as a practitioner asking, 'how useful is this knowledge to my practice?' I make no claim to expertise in the fields of those I quote. My purpose in foraging in these corners of knowledge is to access ideas that can make a contribution to my intended outcomes as a practitioner (Argyris & Schon 1996).

But I was often hiding behind these sources, allowing them to speak for me. This was noticed quite early by others in the CARPP supervision process. One wrote in the margin of an early piece of writing, "I find the theory literature interrupts your narrative." I shared my MPhil/PhD transfer paper with a good friend and invited his comments. He made a number of useful observations in the margins of the paper but wrote just one word - orphans - on the front cover. He had noticed how, quite frequently in the paper, I dropped in a quotation as if to spice up the text, with no real attempt to engage with the material or show how it had influenced my practice. Was I doing this to let my reader know the breadth of my reading or using the source to add weight to my work? I realise that I have not completely overcome this habit in the present thesis but I am now more conscious of the way in which I engage with other sources.

The opposite temptation also presents itself. I could be accused of being a literary butterfly, attracted to many different ideas but not attached to any. I find pleasure in locating my inquiry in relation to other authors and exploring how, as I engage with their ideas, they provoke and challenge my own experience. However I am aware that when I bring other voices to the discussion and begin to revel in their ideas I am in danger of losing my own voice. I notice how my writing has a different density when engaged with another source. The brief dance of ideas changes the style of my writing and I have to deliberately elbow myself out of their honey trap at times and turn back to my own experience. My reader would be right in recognising, at these times, a struggle to find my own voice alongside others.

These issues have been a learning edge throughout my inquiry and have remained alive as I have written this thesis. While the many incidents and activities of my professional life over more than four years have provided a rich source of

experience captured in notes, audio recordings and journal writing, the writing process itself has proved crucial to my learning. Gradually, as my writing has matured, I have felt more confidence in the way I have tried to weave the threads of experience, reflections on those experiences, and the contribution of ideas from other sources into a written text.

As the inquiry has progressed I have become increasingly aware of the problematic of self. As I seek to write with integrity and presence, who is the "I" that writes? I will say more about my emerging sense of self later but at this point I want to acknowledge that it is often my ego that is the first to type and as it does so it gradually suppresses and silences the soul. As the thesis has developed there have been choices about which tales to tell and how they might be told. Awareness of these choices has grown as the thesis has developed, none more so than during my time in the mist since the project ended. "I" have had nothing to say, wrestling with my thoughts, not knowing where I was going, and at times, not really caring. Attempts to write myself out of the mist failed. I could not find the plot. Frank (1995) describes the impossibility of telling in the midst of chaos. "Chaos is what can never be told; it is the hole in the telling" (Frank 1995, 101-102). I felt that "I" had disappeared. "In the chaos narrative, consciousness has given up the struggle for sovereignty over its own experience" (ibid, 104). My ego tried to write this period of my life as a restitution narrative, fully expecting that I would be able to weave the disappointments, frustrations and pain into the project and get things back on track. But it didn't work. Obstacles and resistance continued to cross the path. It's as if, the longer I tried to live by the myth of restitution, the longer I was condemned to live it.

On New Years Eve 2008, as my full time contract with the institution ended I wrote in my journal:

"As I sit with my laptop in my writing corner in the closing hours of the year I'm reflecting on the past few difficult months. The closure of the programme in professional practice, the frustrating negotiation with the

Centre management to provide support for its current students, and my own uncertain future are all very present. I am tempted to recycle the experience again seeking fresh understanding. But this is not the time to be analysing - I've done plenty of that in the past few months. It is a moment to collect myself, to give attention to what I am becoming through this process, to notice the movements of my soul. To feel its unrest and explore the direction of its movement.

I notice the pain of my ego stripped of its opportunity to pursue its ambition. I remind myself that it is too easy to assume that my work in the world, at any given time, belongs to me. On a couple of occasions I have expressed the feeling that the programme has been stolen from me. This is not soul language - it is the judgement of a hurt ego. I pause to notice the way in which I so easily become divided, claiming the fruit of the soul's work as a personal possession to be managed and manipulated, lost or stolen. The soul sets free, offering its contribution to the world without price or obligation" (31st December 2008).

The thesis is offered as a narrative, enclosing a broad sweep of professional experience over a five year period. Like the writer of the book of Ecclesiastes I have turned over many sayings in my mind and thought of how best to set them out, seeking to be faithful to the experience and give pleasure to my reader (Ecclesiastes 12:10). What I have done, I hope, has offered glimpses into my professional practice to be judged, not by conventional standards of validity, but by their ability to resonate with my reader. I hope that the narrative has provided space for your imaginative participation, that you have heard my voice and that it has found an echo in your own experience. If it has, it is story, not theory, that has proved to be the more powerful reality (Billington 2001).

During the closing stages of this story I had a dream. In the dream I was riding on a crowded bus, so crowded that the only remaining seat was a jump seat facing backwards, possibly reserved for emergencies. I was so close to the passengers in

the front row that our knees dovetailed. Immediately in front of me was a young boy in uniform wearing a cap with a overloaded satchel on his back. I thought I recognised him but couldn't remember. I estimated his age between 7 and 8. Our faces were no more than a foot apart.

I felt his eyes focus on me and felt slightly uncomfortable. Was he staring at me? Suddenly, without warning, he leant forward and kissed me on the cheek. I smiled and turned away. A conversation had started amongst several of the passengers and I joined in. I don't recall the subject.

The boy kept looking at me but there was nothing sinister in the look. In fact it felt kind and warm. Then again, without warning, he leant forward and kissed me, this time on my lips. And then he stood up to get off the bus at the next stop.

Dreams raise questions, questions that provoke and suggest. Was the boy my younger self acknowledging what I had become? Was there significance in the crowded bus, or that I was facing backwards? Perhaps the kiss on the lips may have been setting my mouth free to speak? Whatever the answer to these questions the dream gave me hope. Although the outward circumstances were pretty dire, I felt affirmed and set free.

### **III Chasing after Wind**

Doing time in the mist gave me an opportunity to read again a book, first published in 1948, that shaped my early practice as a young activist. Its author, Jacques Ellul, was a resistance fighter in the 2nd World War before becoming deputy mayor of Bordeaux. His subsequent academic career was what Antonio Gramsci (1971) would have called an "organic intellectual", a scholar who was not content to just add to the body of knowledge but saw that his "intellectual interest meant concrete commitment" (Clendenin 1989, xxiv). His social and political interests ranged from opposition to the atrocities of the French military in Algeria,

conservation of the Aquitaine coast, and work with disadvantaged youth. He became a Christian "in consequence of his immersion in the saga of the Bible while engaged in the strife of the world" (Stringfellow preface to Ellul 1967, 3). *The Presence of the Kingdom* (Ellul [1948] 1967) inspired my early activism. It rooted my sense of life purpose in a rigorous analysis of contemporary society (offered with a prophetic insight that remains current even today). In it Ellul challenged the dominance of a technical way of thinking (*la technique*) and named the overarching dis-ease of modernity as the idolatry of death. This was the starting grid from which I launched on my career.

Ellul wrote 50 books and 1500 articles. Almost 40 years after the publication of *The Presence of the Kingdom* he turned his attention to writing a commentary on the Biblical book of Ecclesiastes, published in English as *Reason for Being* in 1990. In the introduction to this book he says that it could not have been written until the end of his life - in fact these two books bracket his writing career (1990, 4).

Ecclesiastes are the reflections of someone with a rich experience of life. Like Ellul himself, the writer was an organic intellectual. Ellul tells us the author "cannot place himself at a distance and consider apparently random human activities as if he were examining insects" (ibid 29). He does not adopt the point of view of a scientific observer. He "does not speak of abstract human beings he sees from afar; he speaks of himself" (ibid 30). "He rubs our noses in crude reality" (ibid 28).

If *The Presence of the Kingdom* shaped the start of my professional life, this thesis has culminated in experiences that find their echo in *Reason for Being*. What follows, therefore, is a reflective conversation between ideas addressed in the book of Ecclesiastes and my experience, helped by Ellul's commentary. It strikes me that Ecclesiastes, written perhaps 2,500 years ago, matches the best of recent deconstructionist writing in its relentless insistence that "all is futility and a chasing of the wind" (2:17). One by one our illusions of knowledge, power, wealth and work are stripped away until the reader is left naked and lost. Yet, this is not the end. Weaving through the pages of the book is another theme that can only be grasped when the illusions have been removed. Ellul quotes Bernanos in summarising the

message of the book, "In order to be prepared to hope in what does not deceive, we must first lose hope in everything that does deceive" (1990, 47).

My first response to the message of Ecclesiastes is to affirm the weariness of trying to claim more than can be known. The writer tells us that the pursuit of wisdom is "a worthless task that God has given to mortals to keep them occupied" (1:13). It only brings sorrow (1:18). Here I must be careful to avoid rationalising my present situation. I am no longer a member of an academic community and it would be easy to use this argument to moderate the grief of leaving. I was in the system and successful. And I played the game. Yet I never enjoyed and rarely participated in the intellectual banter that was the game for some. Ideas knocked back and forth, each time with a subtle change in pace or spin knocked across the net like a tennis ball. Like professional tennis, rank and richest came to those who win the game. William James catches the spirit:

"I am convinced that the desire to formulate truths is a virulent disease. It has contracted an alliance lately in me with a feverish personal ambition, which I never had before, and which I recognize as an unholy thing in such a connection. I actually dread to die until I have settled the Universe's hash in one more book! Childish idiot - as if formulas about the Universe could ruffle its majesty and as if the commonsense world and its duties were not eternally the really real" (James quoted in Frank 1995, 17).

I began this inquiry expecting to find the formula or formulae that would shape my work as a programme leader and learning facilitator. Instead I have had my nose rubbed in crude reality (Ellul 1990, 28). I have learnt the eternal significance of "the commonsense world and its duties", and the futility of striving to "settle the Universe's hash." In a lecture on Action Research I gave to a group of new research students just before I left the institution I critiqued the epistemological assumptions of the Enlightenment in which I had been schooled:



Although we aspire to holistic action in the world our ways of knowing are fragmented. We assume that we can understand the world best by breaking it down into its parts, looking at reality through a kaleidoscope of lenses - social, cultural, political, historical, theological or economic, for example. Each of these domains of knowledge have developed their own methodology and language, and "knowledge constituent interest" (Habermas) which is characterised both by the need to maintain academic recognition and the inability of its specialists to speak outside their specialism. The difficulty is in putting Humpty Dumpty together again.

Some things in the world can be explained clearly and known with certainty - which is comforting when dealing with many aspects of the natural world. The speedometer on my car, for example. Yet as the phenomena under investigation becomes more complex it becomes more difficult to hold the complexity within the formulas of description and prediction. Despite the most detailed formulas and powerful computer power it remains impossible to forecast the weather beyond a week.

And, despite attempts in the social sciences to address the most fundamental problems of the world, increased knowledge has not resulted in significant social change – the link between knowledge creation and social transformation is tenuous at best. The human world, pushed and pulled by personal motives and changing relationships, is not a structure that we can map with certainty.

And a knowledge of causes isn't a cure.

Even the most deterministic viewpoint has to recognise the unpredictability of human motivation and choice. It is not that the standard methods of inquiry are wrong, indeed they are very good at what they do, but they are inadequate in our attempt to understand the whole. It is not just that the human world is technically complex, in the sense that it is technically difficult

to grasp, but it is also complex because it necessarily exceeds our capacity to know it incrementally and objectively (Law 2004). "The world is so rich that our theories about it will always fail to catch more than a part of it." (ibid, 8).

Ellul in *The Presence of the Kingdom* expressed this in terms of a call to awareness, a task that includes "a fierce and passionate destruction of myths, of intellectual outmoded doctrines" (1948, 98) and, as we engage with the commonplace world, "to find, behind the theories which splash us and blind us from every quarter, the reality which they hide from us" (ibid). In this pursuit, we are brought to the threshold of the profane and the sacred, a boundary that Ellul suggests marks the limits of human reason. Our knowledge of that which lies beyond the threshold is "hidden from the arrogant gaze of our investigating mind" (Merton 1973, 103).

This research has brought me face to face with the arrogance of my own reason and my participation in the mad and frenetic rush to stay on top of the information explosion. I am reminded of IBM's recent advertising campaign informing their readers that global information now doubles every 23 hours, as if our survival depends upon our ability to grasp the whole. In the view of Ecclesiastes however, the pursuit of such knowledge is futile and "the more words used the greater is the futility of it all" (6:11). This brings me to what I sense is the heart of the message of Ecclesiastes. It is only after we have experienced and tried everything that we can conclude that "all is futility." "The only true wisdom we can aspire to consists of the perception that no wisdom is possible" (Ellul 1990, 159). We are incapable of grasping the whole. This is not a metaphysical claim but a practical conclusion, based on experience. Here is the source of true wisdom - to have applied myself to knowledge and to have discovered its limits. In the words of Pascal, writing 300 years before Ellul:

"Knowledge has two extremes which meet. The first is the pure, natural ignorance in which all people are born. The other extreme is reached by great intellects who, having run through everything that humans can know, find that they know nothing, and they return to that same ignorance from

which they departed; but it is a wise ignorance which knows itself" (Pascal [1961] quoted in Poffenroth, 2004, 93).

I am a child of the Enlightenment and was trained as an engineer. I was not taught how to discern the border of what Otto (1917) called "the numinous." The mist may play havoc with my measuring instruments but I learned to put in the oar and row through, convinced the world beyond the threshold is contained in three dimensions and is accessible to rational thought. To my surprise and delight, however, this inquiry has brought me to see the mist as a holy place, an invitation to face what is beyond with *mysterium tremendum* (ibid), and to see this not only in the death of the programme but in each experience, if I have the patience and discernment to recognise it. Here is the genius of reason - it can know and diagnose its own limitations (Poffenroth 2004). Reason, according to Pascal, knows when to step aside, "the way the sense of smell is uninvolved when reading a book.....Like a telescope that cannot take us to the stars but that lets us know the stars are there and fans the flames of our desire to get there, reason points us to what lies beyond itself" (Poffenroth 2004, 95-96).

Unless, that is, reason serves the system. My journal writing in the three months following the death of the project traces two separate paths between my experience of systemic processes and informal conversations with research students. I was on the receiving end of institutional decisions that closed down my role and, at the same time, engaged in debates about Action Research with custodians of the system. For example, I had distributed copies of Guba and Lincoln's (2005) article on paradigmatic controversies in qualitative research at an Induction School for new research candidates and on several occasions the new Dean raised his concerns about the constructivist and participatory paradigms described in the article. He argued for a dialogue between theorists and practitioners, illustrating his view by reference to the field doctor who needs to talk to a physiologist during an operation. He expressed the hope that action researchers would engage with the certainties of earlier paradigms. There was concern, as well, about the idiosyncratic nature of action research. If Action

Research is focussed on practice, where does the rigour come from? I found these discussions alienating and exhausting. It is hard to talk about Action Research to someone who has never done it.

This was in contrast to the refreshing quality of my conversation with students. Although I no longer had mentoring responsibility, quite a few sought out an opportunity to talk about their research. One, a Kenyan working with the poor in the Nairobi slums, wanted to talk before he returned to Kenya. He quickly informed me that he had found an earlier conversation, prior to his first field trip, very helpful and he wanted to update me on his work and seek my advice. It turned out that my earlier challenge - to give the poor their own voice in his research - had motivated him to spend time listening to the poor. He spoke about a particular case. He had tried to locate the poorest person in a village community to ask her, as an older woman, "what is poverty?". She smiled and said, "I am not poor. I have my eyes and my mind and my limbs." But you are not able to send your children to school or feed them well. "The only thing I lack is someone to talk to about my situation." You are involved with the church and meet in the small group. "Yes but this is not the kind of conversation I need." He told me that these voices had helped him see the importance of creating opportunities for organisations involved in poverty alleviation to listen to the voice of the poor.

I noticed a sense of freedom as we talked about the nature of organisations and explored ways in which he might nurture an attitude of inquiry in these organisations that included the voice of the poor. Although I made no reference to my own situation, I was aware that I was influenced by my recent experience of human systems and the way their identity can lead to plans and policies that set limits on permissible action, often smothering the voice of those they exist to serve. This found its echo in the student's experience of NGO's in Kenya and so our conversation turned to ways he might, as a participant in these situations, facilitate the kind of conversations the older woman in the village longed for. This, it seems to me, is the value, and surprise, of the particular case.

In this thesis I have pursued an epistemology of “the commonsense world and its duties” (James) not by dissecting it but by observing one case as a whole - my own practice - over an extended period of time. In the process I have reached the threshold of rational analysis. The epistemological space beyond the mist is the territory of storytellers, not scientists. It can be untidy and ambiguous. In including the contradictions and uncertainties of the case, narrative cannot be summarised and reduced to general propositions. This, however, is not a weakness of the single case but its strength. Indeed, “it is often a sign that the study has uncovered a particularly rich problematic” (Flyvbjerg 2006, 237). “Predictive theories and universals cannot be found in the study of human affairs. Concrete, context-dependent knowledge is, therefore, more valuable than the vain search for predictive theories and universals” (ibid 224).

This has been a personal story and it is reasonable to assume subject to bias and self-deception. Niebuhr (1949) identifies the source of this distortion in the “pride of reason that forgets that it is involved in a temporal process, and imagines itself in complete transcendence over history” (in Paver 2006, 69). There are two aspects of this inquiry that I hope has kept this overweening pride at bay. Throughout the inquiry I have tried to be transparent, offering my reader access to several cycles of my reflection and presenting my own perspectives, inferences and assumptions as open to testing and critique. Secondly, the contradictions and conflicts themselves constitute an important corrective to arrogant self-serving. As I have bumped into reality I have found the experience has challenged my assumptions and brought into question my ways of doing things. I often found myself short footed, unprepared or in the wrong. I have learned from the contradictions. This is what Schon (1983) called the “backtalk” of the field, something that Geertz (1995) also recognised as a “powerful disciplinary force: assertive, demanding, even coercive” (in Flyvbjerg 2006, 234).

This then is one voice. To adopt the analogy offered by the German theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (1987) the world is like a vast orchestra of different instruments before a performance.

"The choice of instruments comes from the unity that, for the moment, lies silent in the open score on the conductor's podium - but soon, when the conductor taps his baton, this unity will draw everything to itself and transport it, and then we shall see why each instrument is there ... By performing the divine symphony - the composition of which can in no way be deduced from the instruments, even in their totality - they discover why they have been assembled together. Initially, they stand or sit next to one another as strangers, in mutual contradiction, as it were. Suddenly, as the music begins, they realise how they are integrated. Not in unison, but what is far more beautiful - in sym-phony" (1987, 8-9)

I have, in this thesis played one line of the music and one instrument in the orchestra and, through the other sources that have crossed my path suggested some of the harmonies that I have heard. The sound may not always have been tuneful or satisfying but perhaps as you read your line and play your instrument a little more of the symphony of reality will be heard.

## **IV Confronting Hubris**

Robbed of sight as we drifted in the mist my other senses became more alert. I noticed every sound and felt the tiniest breath of air across my cheeks. I was more aware of my inner thoughts and visualised the adventures that had brought us to this place. The days, even weeks, battling the raging storms. The times we almost ran out of supplies. The bountiful gifts we had received from the islands we had visited. But most of all I rehearsed what I had learned on the journey.

I had been excited and overwhelmed by the success of the new programme in professional practice. Although we were pushing the envelope I had the support of the validating university, my own institution and the market. There was little time for reflection as I managed a busy timetable and coordinated its growing demands. I don't know whether, if I had been more watchful, I could have anticipated the

abrupt and brutal action that triggered its closure. But while it continued I was caught up in the excitement and had little difficulty in making decisions or making things happen. I was blind to the possibility that, in acting with such self-confidence, I may have been pushing against the way the world works (or the divine laws as the Greeks would have explained it). Several anecdotes recorded in this thesis reveal the hubris in my practice. It is too easy to presume that when in flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1990) it was of my own doing and therefore to take the personal credit.

While I have attempted to analyse the nature of power in systems (as I did in the previous chapter) I was less conscious of my own exercise of power. As the project gained momentum, I can now see it was because I had my foot on the accelerator. I had created a new system and had become its first servant, working with tunnel vision to ensure its success. The project had been incubated in a permissive and supportive management culture and this undoubtedly contributed to its growth. But the culture changed with the retirement of the Dean. The morning after the project died I woke to find myself in a different environment, at first unclear and uncertain, but increasingly more tightly controlled. Later I described it as "claustrophobic" in my journal. Several weeks after the project died the retiring Dean told me that, because I was so passionate about what I did, the new Dean found me too forceful. Although I tried to discuss this with him, it was more than three months later, after I had moved onto a part time contract, that he told me, "You are very direct and organised. I can mention something to you and overnight you will tell me what needs to be done..." This sequence of events, from a realisation that I had used directive power to build the project, to the difficulties I had in developing a working relationship with the new Dean brought me face to face with my exercise of power.

In the English language the word power is not used as a verb to describe human action, with the consequence, I suggest, that power is experienced as a thing to be possessed. It is difficult to think of power as action. Instead, we have to speak of "controlling" or "influencing", neither of which are satisfactory synonyms. The

commonplace assumption about power is that it is a finite resource divided, usually unequally, between the participants in a relationship. Perhaps I had to have power stripped from me to see how futile it is to hold on to it. The project had filled my horizon so that I had allowed it to take control. Goals are alluring, particularly as they gather momentum, drawing in the means and energy needed to reach them. Beguiled by the goal I became its servant, exercising the power of my role as project leader to satisfy its appetite - fertile ground for hubris.

Ellul (1948) in his prophetic analysis describes the world as having abandoned the intention of achieving worthwhile ends in its preoccupation with means, "we set huge machines in motion in order to arrive nowhere" (1948, 51). No longer does the end justify the means. Means have become ends, justifying themselves. If we intend to achieve great things we must first produce "a plan", the plan then becoming an end in itself. The way of Jesus feels so different. By rejecting the temptation to turn stones into bread, Jesus was rejecting the notion that human need can be met by technical magic. By refusing to accept the offer of "power-over" he was affirming the necessity for "power-with". By rejecting the temptation to "prove" his divinity by throwing himself from the walls of the temple he was taking a huge risk - without this demonstration of power, everything would remain ambivalent and contestable (Ellul 1976). Yet, having spent time in the mist I now can see that this is where truth is found. There is no incontrovertible proof.

There is a similar ambiguity in Jesus's announcement of the kingdom of God. This surely was the mother of all goals. He tells us that it is worth everything - like a precious pearl, or a prodigal son to be looked for and longed for above all else. Yet, surprisingly, it is impossible to find him attaching a plan or strategy to the goal. There is certainly no timetable, "no one knows the time of its coming." And if there are no plans, then there is nothing to manage. Instead we can expect to see its signs in tiny things like a mustard seed and may discover it in the interruptions along the road (Fisher 2009). In Jesus the end is already present in the means (Ellul 1948). He is the end already present in the means. His model is quite simple - be the end for which you long. So - we do not have "to force ourselves, with great



effort and intelligence, to bring peace upon the earth - we have ourselves to *be* peaceful, for where there are peacemakers, peace reigns" (ibid 66).

I had allowed the project to become an end when the task at hand can never be more than a means. I recall other projects I have been involved in through my career. None of them resulted in monuments to my achievement. Each of them were steps on my life journey, their value in the people I had the privilege of working with and what we had learned together. There may be little tangible evidence of our work but the intangibles live on. The presence of our becoming in the heart of our doing.

This leads me to four brief thoughts. Here, on the threshold, I aspire to a different way of exercising power. It is more like the kind of control involved in flying a kite. My only influence on the kite is in the way I hold the string. I must let the wind do most of the work - kite, wind and myself participating in an elaborate dance. Or, to change the analogy, it's the kind of artistry witnessed in Michael Moschen, the juggler. A New York Times review<sup>31</sup> described his performance as,

"... unusual for its visual beauty as well as its virtuosity. The show opened with Mr. Moschen juggling eight crystal spheres so effortlessly that these solid objects gave the impression of turning light as soap bubbles or even liquefying as they passed from hand to hand or glided up and down an arm."

The New Yorker (1998) observed that Moschen gives the impression of allowing objects free to be themselves while entering into a relationship with their essential uncontrollability. In the article he describes juggling as,

"... a right-brain activity that involves letting yourself go, letting things happen ... the most interesting part of my work is learning how to touch an object, and discovering how the objects give up their secrets. I made a rule

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<sup>31</sup> December 12th 1998 (Jack Anderson)

that I would never close my hand around the ball, that I would always keep my hand open. It is virtually impossible to have real control over an object if you are doing that.”

The author of the New Yorker article adds, “Moschen told me that this technique taught him that juggling could be less about control than about the struggle to accept the fear and turmoil around uncontrollable events” (ibid).

Secondly, one of the most well known parts of Ecclesiastes is the poem about time. “For everything its moment, and for every activity under heaven, its time. A time to be born and a time to die ...” There follows a list of twenty eight activities arranged in opposite pairs. Ellul (1990) provides a summary of a number of general points about the poem. It is reasonable to assume that within the poet’s imagination he intends the list to be inclusive of the full range of human activity. Although there is time for everything, it seems that there is no time for doing nothing. Apart from inactivity there is no moral judgement attached to these activities. The poet does not pronounce peace and love, good, or war and hate, bad. There is a time for each. Indeed the poem is followed by the remarkable suggestion that “everything is beautiful in its own time” (3:11) Every moment “contains something valid we must learn to discover” (Ellul 1990, 237). Following this counsel I am encouraged to welcome the task of the moment, whatever it may be. Only the actor can know its proper time. No one else can judge it but God. “In our action we must try to discover how to accomplish, in our time, what God wants beautiful in his time” (ibid 237).

But here is the disturbing conclusion we might draw from the poem. There are twenty eight activities arranged in fourteen contradictory pairs, suggestion that one action (a time for planting, for example) is cancelled by the next (a time to uproot what has been planted). Not only are our thoughts futile, but so are our actions, one cancelled by the next. Although there is no time provided for doing nothing, we are never satisfied by what we have accomplished. Unless I am to descend into hopeless despair I must see this as pointing towards what emerges

through the mist, the realisation that “in the end we are judged by who we have become, not by what we have accomplished” (Feiss 1999, 65).

Thirdly, my reflections on power have also brought me to a new way of thinking of individual action. Notions of power as an attribute or possession locate it in the individual. The word “individual” however has an interesting etymological history. Its origins lie in the opposite of its modern meaning. According to Selby (2002) it originally meant “a person undivided from the whole” (Selby 2002, 83). Its use to designate a single, separate person only arose in the 19th century. So recent articulations of a participatory paradigm don’t have to reach too far back to find their antecedents. I act in a nexus of other actors, our participation with each other creating possibilities for transformation. “In this model, which emphasises relations rather than things, the center of attention is no longer “me,” as a conscious, choosing, acting individual, but the in-between place where rhythm, eye, hand, tool, and emergent design somehow meet” (Reason 2001, 46). A relational understanding of power sets aside aspirations for control and welcomes emergence, where power resides “in-between” in the heart of our interactions with each other.

This leads me to my last thought on power and to the aspiration of a different posture of being/becoming. It takes me towards what I have learned is a core feature of presence in practice. Presence isn’t the absence of conflict and tension but its embrace. Shaw & Stacey (2006) explore this through improvisational drama. Working with Mead’s (1934) understanding of communication as gesture-response they suggest “you are *present* when you respond to a gesture spontaneously and are altered by your response ... if your response to a gesture does not change you, you will recognise yourself as being less *present*” (Shaw & Stacey, 2006, 90 *italics* in original). This leads me to the conclusion that we are more fully present when we experience our participation as a disruption, in some way, to our way of being in the relationship.

I was too young when I first read *The Brothers Karamazov* and I failed to grasp its significance as a Christian apologetic. It was Inchausti (2005) who drew my attention back to its chief protagonist, Alyosha, who does not attempt to move beyond good and evil "but positions himself between them - on the cross" (Inchausti 2005, 57). Alyosha faces the contradictions of the real world "and takes into himself an ever greater share of the problematics of life" (ibid) and as he does so he is changed. As he leaves the church with Zossima's decomposing body inside he throws himself to the ground. "He fell to the earth a weak youth," Dostoyevsky tells us, "but he arose a resolute champion" (ibid 58). This transformation is represented in the language of developmental action-logics as the move from Strategist to Magician, "from being *in the right frame of mind* to having a *reframing mind* ... A reframing mind continually overcomes itself, divesting itself of its own presuppositions .." (Torbert 1991, 62 *italics* in original). It is only possible, it seems to me, to embrace the polarities of a situation and be able to reframe it, if I am released from the assumptions I bring from the past (what was) and my own desires (what ought to be) to replace them with "mindful, even non-evaluative attention to what is - now" (Cooke-Greuter 2002, 33) - the true qualities of presence.

My journey towards integrity in practice has brought me to this threshold where I can see the hubris in myself and have glimpsed a different way of exercising power. It reminds me of Stradivarius, described in George Eliot's poem "God needs Antonio" (1868) as "that plain white-aproned man, who stood at work/Patient and accurate full fourscore years." When questioned about the rewards of his work he replies,

"I like the gold - well, yes - but not for meals.  
And as my stomach, so my eye and hand,  
And inward sense that works along with both,  
Have hunger that can never feed on coin."

And as for fame:

"... when any master holds  
'Twixt chin and hand a violin of mine,  
He will be glad that Stradivari lived,  
Made violins, and made them of the best.  
The masters only know whose work is good:  
They will choose mine, and while God gives them skill  
I give them instruments to play upon,  
God choosing me to help him. ...

'Tis God gives skill,  
But not without men's hands: he could not make  
Antonio Stradivari's violins  
Without Antonio.

## V      **Becoming Myself**

There is a problem in reducing a narrative to anything other than itself and I will therefore resist the temptation to discuss, in any detail, the contribution to knowledge that has emerged through this inquiry. Some of these insights lie hidden in the narrative space that this account has provided, awaiting your participation as reader. Instead I will make a few observations. The narrative explores my scholarship of practice, a way of acting in an inquiring way in the world. I have learned to give attention to the unexpected, to notice the ways my body responds to situations, and to listen to my feelings. I have experienced the ways in which these reactions point to a more relational way of being, and have been pushed, at first reluctantly, to recognise the deeper epistemology of relationship. In belonging is my knowing. I have lived and worked in enabling systems and faced the reversal of fortune when the system closed down the space for innovation. By taking an attitude of inquiry to these situations my professional practice has changed - I might even say, it has been transformed. I make no claim to perfection but at each step my inquiry has been "good enough" to carry me

through, in the same sense that Winnicott (1988) in his work on the formation of the child observed that there are no perfect mothers, only “good enough mothers.”

This journey has uncovered other pathways of inquiry that remain untrod, that I hope to explore beyond the pages of this thesis. It has awakened an interest in the spiritual disciplines of my tradition (silence, prayer, sacred reading, and fasting) and prompted questions about their contribution to ways of knowing and acting professionally. I am also curious about the possible connections between what Torbert (2004) and others call “developmental action logics”, and ways of understanding spiritual development, what Fowler (1981) calls “stages of faith.” Fowler’s analysis draws on the work of Piaget, Kohlberg and Erikson. I suspect that a practice-centred exploration of this territory could be fruitful. One of the disappointments of the inquiries described in this thesis has been the limited opportunity, in the circumstances, to engage in intentional second person inquiry (Reason and Torbert 2001). I look forward to developing these practices, particularly in communities of faith, where reflection on our vocation might lead to responsible action (for social justice or sustainable living, for example) in the world (Coghlan 2005).

Professionally this inquiry has opened my eyes to the power of story, and particularly the stories we tell ourselves and each other. Stories can help us become the authors of our own lives and I intend to take forward my inquiries in this area through personal and small group mentoring and coaching. I have also carried what I have learned in this inquiry into a new project with another university to widen access to university accreditation to practitioners in the Third Sector<sup>32</sup> using practice-centred inquiry approaches.

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<sup>32</sup> The Third Sector is a general term describing social activity that is distinct from the public or the private sector. Various terms are preferred by practitioners in the sector including voluntary, charitable, social enterprise, non-governmental (NGO), civil society organisation, or community organisation. Third Sector organisations are involved in a wide variety of roles including social services, health, environment, recreation, religious and educational activities.

But perhaps the most important ongoing inquiry is personal, as I press towards the goal of becoming myself moment by moment in practice. There is ample evidence of self, in different guises, at work throughout this thesis. The ego self, managing my attempts to manage my responsibilities. The intellectual self, floating above the messiness of life, providing “answers” that didn’t work in practice. Throughout this journey I have had a clear sense of agency. I have acted, reflected and acted again. But what gives me the confidence there is an “I” to act with integrity and presence? I have uncovered the hubris in my actions, and the myopia in many of my conclusions. I have practised releasement, letting go of assumptions and holding back from action; and I have been assertive, acting with intention in the world. I emerge from this inquiry, therefore, aware of the essential art of knowing when to persist and when to desist (Marshall 1999). But I also sense there is more to know about becoming myself.

Inquiries into the nature of soul and self have occupied the greatest minds and it is beyond the scope of this conclusion to explore this literature. However a brief assessment will lead me to where I need to go. The notion of a unified self, introduced in the seventeenth century in the work of Descartes and Locke as a substitute for “soul”, didn’t survive for long (Martin and Barresi 2006). In setting up self as the epistemological centre of the universe, the modernist project was built on a separation between self and non-self. The self “comes to be seen as a *subject*, a center of experience and action, set over against a world of objects that can be known and manipulated” (Guignon 2004, 32). The self was to be the source of unity and power. But it was unable to live up to this exalted role. Hopes of retaining a unified self faded fast. “The story of Western theorizing about the self and personal identity is not only, but centrally, the story of humankind’s attempt to elevate itself above the rest of the natural world, and it is the story of how that attempt failed” (Martin and Barresi 2006, 305).

In a familiar image, the American pragmatist, William James suggested that we might think of the unity of the self like a herd of cattle (Martin and Barresi 2006, 226). Each animal belongs to its owner not because they are branded; they are

branded because they belong to the owner. The analogy suggested to James a way of unifying the different selves of our daily experience by positing the existence of a spiritual entity that owns each part. But who is the owner? James was forced to concede that the individual may have more than one personal self, and as an object, the personal self may be divided into the material self, the social self, etc. As the notion of a unified substantial self disappears the human quest then focuses on the choice of a central character to assume the defining role. "The seeker of his truest, strongest, deepest self must review the list carefully, and pick out the one on which to stake his salvation. All other selves thereupon become unreal" (James in Guignon 2004, 112). But who is choosing which self to place my bet on?

Perhaps, as Nietzsche suggested, it isn't necessary to pin my hopes on a single self. While recognising a multiplicity of subjects, he felt no urge to identify a unifying source. Rather, it is in the interaction of these subjects that our identities are formed, "making their entrances and exits as the context demands" (Guignon 2004, 112). So, as Markus and Nurius suggest, we may be a colony of Possible Selves, "all crowding to take possession of a Now Self" (in Bruner 1990, 100), or we may aspire to a "cosmopolitan self" (Giddens in Guignon 2004) that integrates different subjects into an urban self capable of functioning in a variety of contexts.

More recent perspectives on self have turned outwards to find the influences on self, suggesting the self as formed from the interaction of external forces, constructing our ways of encountering things and our own identities as persons. Gergen was one of the first to demonstrate how an individual's self-esteem and self-concept changed in reaction to their social environment (Bruner 1990). My wife and I became grandparents earlier this year, giving us fresh appreciation of the first days and weeks of new life. Before she develops self-awareness, our granddaughter has experienced others - her mother, father, other relatives and members of various social networks in which she now lives. She has experience being a part of "we" through which she is discovering herself, as the product of these social encounters and as fulfilment of the expectations of her social



environment. This can be a liberating or oppressive experience. Foucault, for example, points out the two meanings of the term *subject* - and emphasises the control and dependence that arises in social settings (Guignon 2005). Gergen on the other hand recognised the enormous human capacity for reflexivity and our “dazzling” ability to envision alternatives that enables the self to embrace or escape what the context has on offer (Bruner 1990). But this suggests, to me, a source of being that transcends the social and cultural context.

Rather than a centre-less self or a socially defined self, both of which undermine my sense of agency and responsibility, the notion of a dialogical self fits well with my emerging understanding of relational practice. The dialogical self has its roots in the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin, whose insight is summarised by Guignon: “we are at the deepest level *polyphonic* points of intersection with a social world rather than *monophonic* centers of self-talk and will” (Guignon 2004, 121). Yet, while this perspective offers support to a more relational way of understanding myself, like the social constructivist position, it is important to avoid the self becoming a mere placeholder in a web of social interactions (ibid). On its own, the dialogical self remains elusive.

The narrative self, on the other hand, presumes an author. “We are not just tellers of a story, nor are we something told. We are a telling” (Guignon 2004, 127). The narrative self recognises life as a project in self-making, receiving what is given as gift and reworking and refining it to craft a self that is my own. I welcome the introduction of sequence and time to the notion of self. Who I am is emerging through the experiences of time, integrating the new and the old, seeking harmony out of the discordant encounters of life. The different episodes of life, tragic or comic, only make sense in terms of their place in my larger life story and in the context in which it is lived. Crafting an authentic self from these raw materials requires, for Taylor (1989), awareness of what gives meaning and direction to my life - what provides “the frame or horizon within which I try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done” (1989, 27). But I must be realistic. I craft my life in social and cultural settings that contradict “what I

endorse or oppose" (ibid), and impose their own expectations on what is appropriate. I face systemic pressures to conform my story to their story. Where can I find the courage and freedom to be, or become, myself?

Something nags at the edges of my mind as I survey this terrain of the self. Each perspective provides suggestive insights in my search to understand and become myself. Yet each leave me with doubts. Perhaps the self cannot be known. Maybe I should be content with the moment by moment "self-states" of thoughts, memories, physical sensations, emotions and fantasies, like a child's kaleidoscope "in which each glance through the pinhole of a moment of time provides a unique view" (Davies in Cooper-White 2007, 55). Perhaps I should accept Martin and Barresi's (2006) conclusion that "the self stands naked and exposed, revealed for the first time for what it is; a misleading, albeit socially indispensable and incredibly useful fiction" (p303-304).

I have learned from each of these perspectives on self, but am left feeling unsatisfied, incomplete. It may only be a useful fiction but I have a sense that, although it lacks objective identity, the self is never without a centre, even if this is never settled and is in continuous production. I talk to my self, quite often. I tell my self what I need to do. Sometimes I talk to a part of my self. These statements may be just a literary device but how else can we access the conversations we have with ourselves? They may also point towards an important insight. Moore (1992), in his introduction to the soul, suggests that the first step in care of the soul is to become familiar with the ways in which it manifests itself, by observation. He notes that *serv* in the word "observance" refers back to the practice of tending sheep. When observing the soul we keep an eye on its sheep, watching where they wander. I notice in this image that the word sheep in the English language is both singular and plural. Is self, or soul, one or many?

I recognise my self as a conundrum of hopes and hurts, fears and dreams that are unsettled and under constant negotiation. I get through the day because "we" have arrived at some kind of settlement. I am not sure, at this point, whether this is

an active or passive process, whether it is an active choice or whether we find it happening to us, but it involves some kind of ordering of self. Who, or what, then is involved in gathering the self? I am aware that it might be my executive self - my ego, doing its best for me. It may often be my mental self - thinking for the whole and trying to impose its solutions on my action. The process might involve the censoring or denial of some sheep and the privileging of others. The gathered self is always provisional. Life experiences assault and scatter the fragile arrangement, like frightened sheep, sometimes with little consequence, but at others, with huge effect. The disruptions of my life, such as those presented in this thesis, don't just raise questions about my assumptions and intentions. They question who I am in the situation, calling for a new settlement of my self. Is this the destiny of the soul? To be under constant negotiation as reality bombards its territory from day to day?

I have described this inquiry as a religious quest and have framed it with the legend of Brendan's voyage. This ancient tale may seem naive and quaint to modern ears and hardly a suitable way of framing an inquiry into professional practice. This yarn is no match for a comprehensive literature review or a carefully argued research methodology. Yet, as Severin (1978) reflected on his recreation of the voyage, the risks and rewards of the journey not only inspired the early travellers but also those who retraced it in the 20th century. "Time and again we found ourselves deeply impressed, and sometimes awed, by what we encountered at sea ... the reality was far greater than the expectations, and stirred us even with our twentieth-century attitudes" (ibid 235).

There is a feature of Brendan's story that I have not highlighted until now. It is what Green (2005) describes as "the tensive relatedness between prosaic and sacral time/space" (2005, 122). There is a natural rhythm in the story between the two, as if the whole journey is lived in this liminal space, "linking the actual experiential reality to the great rhythms of liturgical celebration" (ibid). The journey is "not so much to an actual geographical place as to an integrative center" (ibid 121). The story seems designed to show how "the journey toward or into God is coterminous with the process of humanization" (ibid 120).

While writing this final meditation I pulled a dusty copy of Kierkegaard's book *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing* (1948) from my bookshelf. As on other occasions throughout this thesis, this may be serendipitous, but my reflection has been arrested by his strident critique of anything that might offer easy solutions to the question of identity. He has no admiration for someone who can swim in shallow water where, if tired or frightened, they can touch the bottom. We have an eternal responsibility to become an individual, he says (1948, 198). We find ourselves, he argues, by choosing ourselves in the light of eternity. He is ruthless in his demolition of all finite settlements. But, as Taylor comments on Kierkegaard's imperative, as we "choose ourselves" by renouncing all finite things, "we receive them all back ... no longer as determinants of our final end, but as relative to our life project" (Taylor 1989, 450). In his discussion of Kierkegaard, Carnell (1965) adds that the person who already *is* must *become*, and we become an individual by mediating eternity in time. Outwardly nothing may appear to have changed but this inner transformation redirects our lives. "In choosing myself, I become what I really am, a self with an infinite dimension. We choose our real selves; we become for the first time true selves" (Taylor 1989, 450).

Kierkegaard's notion of becoming an individual involves radical choices to renounce the distractions that offer temporary settlements of the self. Paul expresses this in terms of de-centring and re-centring the self on God (Ephesians 4:22-24, Colossians 3:9-10). The verbs in these texts are in the imperative. This is a choice, as Kierkegaard says. We choose to become our true selves by setting aside the old self and its ways of being, and re-centring ourselves on eternity. This new centre opens the self up, "making it capable and willing to give itself for others and to receive others in itself" (Volf 1996, 71). But what might this imply?

To answer this question I needed to explore a different way of thinking about time. After listing the ways in which human action contradicts itself in time, the writer of Ecclesiastes observes that God gives to humans "a desire for eternity" (Eccl 3:11). Eternity is not a metaphysical idea. For the Jewish writer eternity was an historical reality. What is at stake is a different view of time. Eternity is seen, not as time of

endless duration, but time in which each moment is pregnant with the promise of the future - to be fully alive. Purser and Petranker (2005) capture this in their description of organisational change that is based on "unfreezing the future" - a concept that reverses Kurt Lewin's model of planned change. For Lewin, and the dominant culture of organisational change, the mindset is governed by the notion that since the present is conditioned by the past and the future is unknown, change will only come by unfreezing the past to create an alternative future. Purser and Petranker however explore a way of experiencing time that embraces what Petranker calls a "dynamic future" that, although it is without content, "offers the whole of what is and has been and could be" (Petranker 2005, 250).

To play with the analogy of a stream, it all depends on which direction I am standing in the flow. Is the source behind me or ahead? Facing downstream the present flows from behind me with all the drift and debris of the past. I am locked into what Purser and Petranker call "conditioned time" (2005, 197). I am trapped by the contradiction between what is and what might have been. The mindset is of incremental change, focused on solving problems and maintaining narrative identity. Action is based on sense making and rational planning. The only resource available lies in what I have inherited from the past.

Facing upstream, on the other hand, time flows towards me, untouched by human action, unknown to human knowing. This orientation places me in "unconditioned time" that has "neither a cause nor an effect and is thus not subject to the limits inherent in conditioned time" (Purser & Petranker 2005, 194). This is to make the future the source of knowledge, letting go of the stories that constitute the past and finding them freshly available but metamorphosed "from subjective conditioning to dynamic availability" (Petranker 2005, 251). To extend the analogy slightly, the wake, left behind as I move through the water, can never drive the boat. Instead, I listen to the wind and the wind tells me what to do. As the future flows towards me I am no longer who I have been. I am on my way to becoming what I will be. In this moment, as a "choosing individual" (Kierkegaard) I stand looking upstream, my attention focused on what is emerging. My posture, leaning

forwards into the stream as it approaches, as one might when walking into a strong head wind. The desire for eternity resulting in intentional action in the world.

I note a further consequence of facing upstream. My action needs no longer to be determined by a temporary truce between my many selves. Facing upstream I witness what, in the traditional language of my Christian background, is called "salvation." What was scattered is made whole, what was torn apart is reconciled. As I experience the incoming presence of God I find myself overcome with a sense of being accepted and loved, a sentiment captured by Bennett: "At the very point of failing at our own self-invented fantasies of success, power and control, we find a small opening into the Greater Life - the narrow entrance through which we pass into the spaciousness of Love" (Bennett in Cooper-White 2007, 63). It is Love that softens the hard edges of egoic thought and action. It is Love that holds my divided self together and weaves it into something beautiful.

This vision of spacious Love, what Olthuis called "the wild spaces of love" (1997, 247), reminds me of the image of Trinity, suggested by Cooper-White (2007) and quoted earlier in the thesis. "It is like a waterfall, full of light, color, and dancing shapes, that provide continual refreshment, a long cool drink for parched feelings and hardened thinking, cleansing for the perceived wounds and stains, cooling for fevered human hubris..." (Cooper-White 2007, 82). Early on my journey with Brendan we came to a waterfall of crystal pure water. We had drifted at sea for weeks and our supplies of water had run dry, yet the water from the island poured over precipitous cliffs that we couldn't approach for fear of our lives. I was thirsty, frustrated and afraid. Nick, as he moved into that place of the story in the supervision session, imagined it happening in silence, the water plunging into the sea like a sheer shaft of sunlight. "What happens when you enter the sea?" we asked. "I go into the deepest currents of the ocean," was the reply. "Does anything live in you?" "There are no creatures living in me," came the response, "but I have tremendous life giving properties for the plants that live at the side of the stream."

Then who am I becoming? The answer is, in part, my story, a tale of thought and action. But this is not the only story that can be told. It is not the story others, whose paths crossed mine, would tell. The story is not me, yet its details offer a likeness or a metaphor of myself. As you have taken this journey with me, I hope you have glimpsed, sometimes hidden by “the ego self that wants to inflate,” or “the intellectual self that wants to hover above the mess of life in clear ungrounded ideas” (Palmer 2000, 69) the self that is emerging from its faltering attempts to respond to the love that holds me together and inspires me to act in unconditioned time.

The decision to offer myself through narrative has been intentional. The moment we try to explain who someone is we get entangled in abstract qualities and character traits that describe the person. When my contract ended in the summer of 2009 I was encouraged to upload my profile on the professional networking site, LinkedIn. I opened an account and filled in the details of my career. A couple of weeks later a good friend challenged me to copy the style others have adopted of using an appreciative language of themselves to beef up their profile. “Just add a few adjectives to the description of your skills,” he advised. I pondered the nature of adjectives attaching themselves, as they do, to nouns. The noun “chap” is pretty neutral (perhaps implying some degree of familiarity or warmth) but when the word “wonderful” is added, as my friend did in his email, it changes character immediately. But is my true self just an adjective? My LinkedIn profile languished online, for lack of self-promoting adjectives.

Although this thesis has emerged in autobiographical form I have been in pursuit of something quite different from a CV. What has developed through the writing has been an awareness of myself, visible indirectly through my encounters with the world. Although the story is quite personal I hope I have avoided the dangers of self-indulgence. I offer this story not because I find myself interesting. Instead my interest is a vocational interest, recognising that: “It is the vocationally-oriented autobiographies, those that point away from a direct, inward perception of the self

to what drives the self, drives it concretely in the world, which are the most revealing of the self" (TeSelle 1975, 165).

Furthermore, in exploring who I am becoming through my encounters with the world I have no intention of encouraging others to follow me, but I hope that my journey might contribute to a conversation that explores what is inevitably difficult to perceive and articulate yet is deeply desired - a quality of integrity and presence that transforms practice. This has also been, for me, a religious quest. In unexpected ways my encounters have pointed me back to my own faith tradition where I have discovered resources that have helped me make sense and find direction in the complex ambiguity of professional life. This has involved theological work, not of the kind frequently practised in the church, from the neck up, but embedded and embodied in quotidian life. If, then, this thesis might add a further line to my CV, I would like to borrow it from TeSelle (1975). Alluding to the Apostle Paul she writes of "the mystery that only the autobiographical theologian deals with. We see into such a glass darkly and know little of ourselves, but some day we shall know who we are even as we are now known" (ibid 176).



beyond the mist  
we face each other  
strangers before  
we meet in the middle  
place of love

no longer chasing wind  
with furrowed brow and  
fevered pace,  
receiving each new given  
as a gift

yet not smugly settled,  
an attitude of inquiry  
persisting and desisting  
continues in tense  
harmony

awakened to  
the hidden senses of  
sensation, I turn  
upstream to enter  
unconditioned time

in spite of heartless  
system, self finds its  
voice, the story moving  
forward to where  
God rests

and knows my name.



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